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SECOND MAY NUMBER

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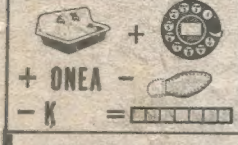
CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE.



You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it *fast* or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

Came week-end liberty, I studied. Came a holiday, I studied. Came the end of the six weeks, I was top man in the class. Within six weeks I had mastered two years of high school math, thanks to the training I'd gotten.

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31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND
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May 20, 1955
Volume 191, No. 4

RANCH ROMANCES

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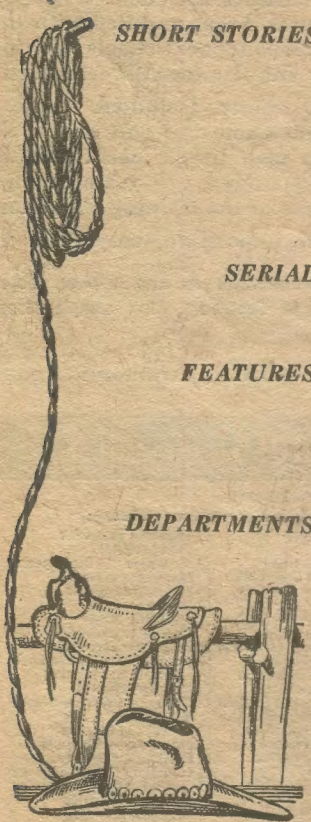

HELEN TONO
Editor

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A Couple of Sailors

Dear Editor:

We are two lonely sailors serving in the Far East. Frank is 6' tall, weighs 185 lbs., and has brown hair and eyes. He likes all sports, dancing, and hillbilly records. I am 6' 4" tall, weigh 190 lbs., with brown hair and eyes. My hobbies include auto racing, basketball, and letter writing. We would like to hear from girls of all ages, and promise to answer all letters.

ROBERT STURTEVANT

Frank Pagnini, EN2
Robert Sturtevant, ET3
USS Talladega APA 208
c/o FPO, San Francisco, California

The First Time

Dear Editor:

I read RANCH ROMANCES, but this is the first time I've tried writing to the Air Mail column. I'm 19 years old, 5' 5" tall, weigh 125 lbs., have brown hair and blue eyes. I'd particularly like to write to servicemen overseas, as I hear that some of them don't receive much mail—but I'll answer all letters I receive.

JOYCE HOOLE

4728 N. Ash Street
Spokane, Washington

Time on His Hands

Dear Editor:

I have read RANCH ROMANCES for several years and like it very much. I've written to a lot of "Air Mail" pen pals, but I need a few more to keep me busy. You see, I'm just getting over a broken hip, and so I have time on my hands. I am a young man of 35, 5' 6", with brown eyes and hair. I've been in the service for eight years, and I can tell of some interesting travels overseas.

GUY F. HART

319 Avlon Boulevard
Wilmington, California

Horse Lover

Dear Editor:

I would like to hear from pen pals between the ages of 18 and 25, who are interested in horses, rodeos and shows. I am 18 years old, have brown hair and blue eyes, am 5' 2" tall and weigh 105 lbs. I also like to swim, read, skate, dance, and travel. I will answer all letters, and will exchange photos.

VERONICA "RONNIE" DICKINSON

R. R. #1
Ballwin, Missouri

Pretty Pair

Dear Editor:

We are writing in the hope that you will put our names in the next issue of our favorite magazine. I am Doris Kuhnly, and am 5' 2" tall. I have dark brown hair and hazel eyes, and am 15 years old. My girl friend, Sharon Jacobs, is 5' 3" tall, has light brown hair and gray eyes, and is 19. She is a very pretty girl and is quite popular. We both like to write and receive letters, and would like to hear from anyone of any age. So come on, guys and gals, write to us soon.

DORIS KUHNLY

Doris—356 1st Street
St. Paul Park, Minnesota
Sharon—1098 Sylvan Street
St. Paul, Minnesota

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Gate Crasher

Dear Editor:

I have read RANCH ROMANCES for years, but this is my first try at crashing the gate of "Our Air Mail." Give me a break, won't you? I'm very lonely and want some pen pals. I am 34 years old, 5' 5" tall, weigh 150 lbs., have dark brown hair and blue-gray eyes. I like all sports, and I like writing letters. I will answer all letters and will exchange snapshots.

JOE DAVIS

R. R. #2
Ataka, Oklahoma

Writing's a Habit

Dear Editor:

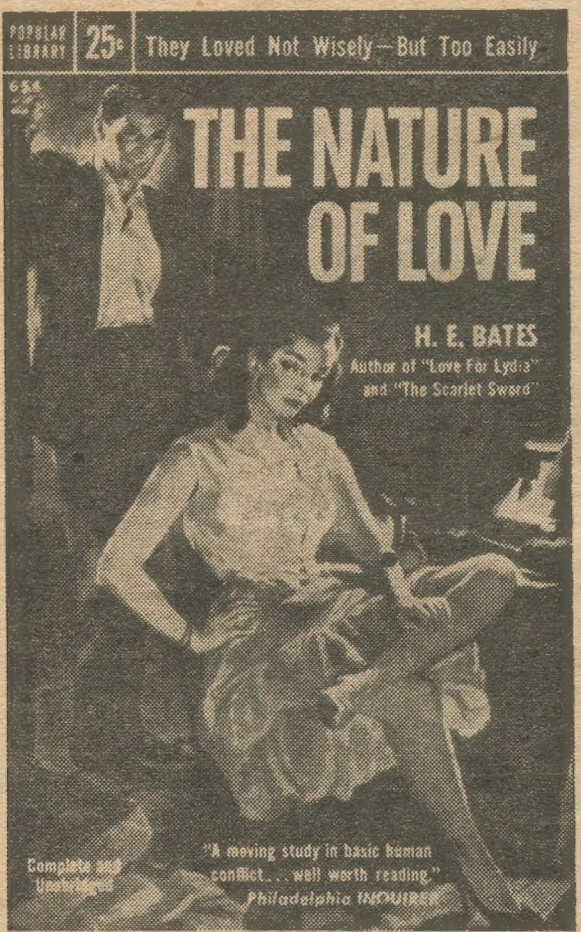
I just returned from Korea about three months ago. I kind of got used to receiving mail, and it's hard to get out of the habit. I read the "Air Mail" column every month, so I thought I might get my letter printed with the rest. I am 22 years old, 6" tall, weigh 180 lbs., and have black hair and brown eyes. I'm interested in all sports, and I also like writing letters. I'd especially like to hear from girls between the ages of 16 to 25. I'll answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots with all who are interested.

JAMES McFARLAND

Box 16
Green City, Missouri

(Continued on Page 113)

JEALOUSY DESTROYED THE ONLY MAN SHE EVER LOVED!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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

WASTE BASKETS in a Lansing, Mich., park were painted bright orange to make them easier for visitors to locate. It worked so well that visitors not only spotted the baskets—they promptly stole 'em.

"IT WAS so nice and clean I didn't know it was there," explained a man who walked, unscratched, through the plate glass door in the Detroit, Mich., license bureau.

A BERKELEY, Calif., man parked his state-owned vehicle, fed the parking meter, then crossed the street to tell a policeman that he didn't think he needed to pay the fee when he was on state business, but he'd done it anyway just to be safe. The policeman commended him on his caution, then handed him a ticket for jaywalking.

A REDWOOD CITY, Calif., man who loved cats enough to campaign against an ordinance requiring pussies to be kept on a leash, is now in bed from an arm infection resulting from an ungrateful cat's scratch.

LOSING his job was the luckiest thing that ever happened to a Sidney, Nebr., man. He decided to try farming, bought some land, and discovered a gas well on his new property.

A DES MOINES, Ia., couple wondered a little when they attended a wedding at the Grace Methodist Church and didn't recognize any of the other guests. When the bride and groom turned out to be strangers too, the couple checked their invitation and found that it was for the Grace Methodist Church—in Cedar Falls, Ia.

THE GRASS is growing tall on the lawn of a Colusa, Calif., home. The last time the mower was used it ran over a box of .22 caliber shells—dumped on the grass by persons unknown—which shot off in all directions. Now nobody will mow the lawn, for fear some unexploded ammunition may still be lying in wait.

A SALEM, Ore., housewife called firemen when she smelled smoke and thought her attic was ablaze. They arrived in time to put out the fire—which had been smoldering in the back of the housewife's dress.

A TERSE news report from Aran, Mexico, says that a mourner at a wake there stole the coffin. It doesn't explain what happened to the corpse.

"REVENOORS" finally caught up with a Woodson, Ark., a moonshiner, whose still, almost hidden in the middle of a lake, had been ignored as a piece of floating junk till a drought dried up the lake and revealed the marine distillery.

A COLUMBUS, Ohio, special policeman explained, when arrested for looting stores he was hired to guard, that he had been stealing merchandise for years so he could open a store of his own some day.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

WHITE FEATHER

Three popular young stars add to the zest of 20th Century-Fox's new Western of Indian fighting on the wild Cheyenne frontier

TO JUDGE by some of the movies that have been around recently, Hollywood is having severe attacks of conscience about its treatment, in various Westerns of years gone by, of the American Indian.

It has been a long time since we've seen any Indian who was a vicious, scalp-hunting murderer—or if he was he had good reason. It's the whites who are the villains these days. This change of heart in Hollywood should be gratifying to the Indians—even though it probably doesn't do them any practical good. But after all, that's not the province of Hollywood.

Anyway, the latest example of the "noble redman" theme is the 20th Century-Fox Western, *White Feather,* an exciting story about the Cheyennes of Wyoming in 1877. In *White Feather* it is the dishonesty of a few men, both white and Indian, that leads to conflict between all whites and all Indians.

You'll see a promising collection of stars of tomorrow in *White Feather.* Robert Wagner, Debra Paget and Jeffrey Hunter, who have the leading roles, have all been creating various-sized splashes lately. Each of them is building up a loyal and vocal body of fans.

They're old friends—and natural competitors as well—since they all started at the same studio at nearly the same time. They all appeared in the same movie once before, a thriller called *Fourteen Hours.* And Bob Wagner and Jeff Hunter also played together a couple of years ago in *The Frogmen.*

Naturally, with all this in common, they had plenty to talk about whenever they had time between scenes. Mostly they talked about the pitfalls attending the pursuit of success in Hollywood.

Each of them is very determined to get to the top, but none of them was willing to explain just how it's done. They did agree that you accept every part that comes along and do the best you can with it, whether you like it or not.

But all of them liked their parts in *White Feather.* Bob plays John Tanner, a white surveyor, who becomes a fast friend of Little

Dog, the son of the Cheyenne chief, which is Jeff's part.

Debra plays Appearing Day, an Indian princess, and she was most enthusiastic about this new role, because it was as an Indian maid that she got her first real opportunity in Hollywood—when she appeared with Jimmy Stewart in *Broken Arrow*.

Debra's only complaint was about the name of the character she plays.

" 'Appearing Day' " she said, "may sound romantic to an Indian, but it just sounds ridiculous to an American. The movies are dead set on being authentic these days, so I guess it's a genuine Indian name, all right. But personally I'd rather have a fake Hollywood name like Apple Blossom or Golden Doe."

As a matter of fact, according to producer Robert L. Jacks, Hollywood is more authentic about Indians than Indians are themselves. Whenever a picture dealing with redmen is being cast, hundreds of real Indians show up for jobs in the battle scenes.

The trouble is, they don't look like Indians. These real redmen are getting more pale-faced every day. They require as much make-up as Debra or Jeff before they could possibly be mistaken for the kind of Cheyennes who inhabited the old West.

Make-up man Lou Hippe agreed that the problem was serious.

"When we try to put make-up on them," he said, "they object, nine times out of ten, pointing out that they're real Indians and so there was no need to give them additional coloring. I actually had to show some of them color slides of real Cheyennes before they'd let me darken them up."

The picture is in color and in CinemaScope, so you'll be able to judge for yourself who are most convincing as Indians—the genuine originals who play the extra parts, or the Americans-come-lately like Debra and Jeff who, made to look like redmen—or women—play the leads.

"Indian" Jeffrey Hunter and Debra Paget like white man Bob Wagner

KIRK DOUGLAS
Rags to Riches

RANCH FLICKER TALK

ANYONE who wants proof that hard work pays off should consider the career of Kirk Douglas. Kirk is the Horatio Alger story come to life, the personification of the rags-to-riches story.

His parents were Russian immigrants with an unpronounceable name, who came full of the usual hopes to the land of opportunity. They settled in Amsterdam, N. Y., had seven children, and had a constant struggle to keep the family fed and clothed.

The only boy, Kirk, had to help out financially by the time he was 10. For years his day began at 5 A.M., when he got up to meet the train from New York bringing the morning papers, and ended at 7:30 PM, when the last of the evening papers was delivered. In between, of course, he also went to school.

After he graduated from high school, he set out for college with $163 he'd saved. He arrived at St. Lawrence University a humble hitchhiker on a fertilizer truck. Four years later, when he left college, he was one of the biggest men on campus—Student Body President, Campus Council President, President of the Dramatic Society, President of the German Club, as well as being champion wrestler and, incidentally, dormitory waiter.

From St. Lawrence he went to New York, where he won a scholarship at the American Academy of Dramatic Art, and where he changed very quickly from a big frog in a little puddle to a little frog in a big puddle.

He could afford only the barest lodgings, and he got a part-time job as a waiter—to make use of his experience in that line, but primarily to make sure he'd eat regularly.

When he graduated from the Academy he hoped his schooling was over, but he had one more course to take—one which made him an Ensign in the U. S. Navy. He served as a communications officer in both the Atlantic and the Pacific.

After his discharge he took up the unfinished business of becoming an actor, with more determination than ever. He worked in radio and television and finally got a few parts on Broadway, for which he actually turned down a chance to go to Hollywood.

When his last show closed, however, and no producers were clamoring for his services, he warmed up toward the movies. He went to the studio which had offered him a screen test and offered them a second chance at his talents. Surprisingly, they took it.

Kirk made his first splash in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, and six movies later he was a sensation in *Champion*.

Just because Kirk has made the top, that doesn't mean he's stopped working hard. He still spends weeks, or even months, getting ready for every part he plays. It took him three weeks of study with Harry James before he felt he could imitate the breathing and fingering of a trumpet player for his role in *Young Man with a Horn*. He went out on several assignments as a reporter before he was ready for the newsman's part in *Ace in the Hole*.

For his new Western, *Man Without a Star*, the boy from upstate New York spent a couple of weeks, full-time, with wrangler, stunt man and Westerner Fred Carson, learning riding, roping and shooting, Western-style.

And in between scenes he never retired to his dressing room to read or take a nap, but always worked on his characterization, trying, as he said, "to feel like a Westerner."

Don't think that all work and no play makes Kirk a dull boy. His interests are so varied and his knowledge so wide that he's fun to talk to—whenever he stops working long enough to shoot the breeze.

Universal

Kirk has worked hard—but he always gets what he goes after

Man From The

WAS LEA HAGEN evil . . . or was there a curse on those who loved her? Ellison had to find out . . . if he could stay alive long enough

THE adobe was built close to the trail, a sun-baked hut without trees growing near or a creek flowing past. It was a lonesome looking place, Drew Ellison thought, probably deserted. Then he came closer and saw a woman sitting in the doorway. She was a forlorn figure in the afternoon sunlight, a Mexican woman whose age it was hard to guess.

Ellison stopped his black gelding not far from the doorway. He looked down at her and asked, "Can you tell me how much farther it is to Dormingo?"

"Just over the hill," the woman said, eyeing his horse. "But a short distance from here."

He thanked her and was ready to ride on when she spoke again. "I have seen another such brand as is on your horse, señor."

Ellison had lifted his reins. Now he lowered them and looked searchingly at the woman in the doorway, waiting for her to tell him more.

"My name is Maria Salazar," she said. "I live here alone

Brazos

by RAY GAULDEN

and I spend much time watching the trail, seeing those who travel it." She looked away from him, letting her gaze rove southward, the way Ellison had come. "I remember a man who not long ago passed with a herd of cattle. He was young and lean like you, and the brand on his mount was the same as the one on yours."

"My name's Ellison," he told her. "The man you speak of was Jim Blake, my partner."

"This one called Jim Blake," she said in a cryptic tone, "he went to the town of Dormingo, but he did not leave."

"He was killed," Ellison said stonily. "Shot in the back."

"Do you know why, señor?"

"He was carrying ten thousand dollars on him."

The brown face was expressionless. "I do not believe that is the reason your friend was killed."

"What other reason would anyone have?"

"There is a girl, señor, who lives in the hills, a girl with green eyes and a face more beautiful than words can tell."

Ellison was motionless, staring at her. He remembered the letter he'd had from Jim, saying he had gotten an offer of ten thousand for the herd, but that it was going to take the cattle buyer a few days to raise the money. In the meantime, Jim had said, he was in no hurry to leave Dormingo, because he had met a girl with green eyes.

"What about this girl?" Ellison asked.

"Her name is Lea Hagen."

"And you think she had something to do with Jim's being killed?"

Maria Salazar's shoulders lifted slightly. "I heard talk that they spent much time together, and I know this is not good."

"Why?"

"Because there is something evil about this girl, señor, something I do not understand, but which I know to be true. Your friend was not the first to love her, nor was he the first to die because of it."

Superstitious talk, Ellison thought, and felt a touch of impatience. He said, "I'll remember the name—Lea Hagen. Maybe I'll look her up."

The Mexican woman's eyes were on his face. "I can see you do not believe what I tell you about this one with the green eyes. But it is so, nevertheless. And it would be better if you did not meet her, for if you do then you'll—"

"Be marked for killing too?" Ellison smiled. "She must be quite a girl."

The dark eyes were steady, unblinking. "In the town of Dormingo, you will learn that what I tell you is not the talk of one who is loco."

SOMETHING in the woman's tone stirred a vague uneasiness in Ellison. Then he swore under his breath and again lifted the reins to ride on. When he had gone a short distance, she called to him.

"Señor."

He looked back at her, waiting.

There was indecision in her eyes, something that puzzled him. Then it was gone, and she said heavily, "It is nothing. *Vaya con Dios.*"

Ellison rode on, wondering about the strange-talking woman, knowing she had been on the verge of telling him something and had decided against it. Why? He topped the hill and glanced back. Maria Salazar was still there in the doorway of her adobe, staring after him.

The town of Dormingo was a cluster of board shacks, most of them unpainted, a place that had been nothing more than a wide spot in the road before the railroad came. Now it was a shipping center with a maze of pens on the edge of town.

He rode past the depot, a frame building painted a dull yellow, and he heard the clang of a switch engine as it moved a string of empty cars onto a siding. Cattle were bawling, making a discontented sound, and the smell of them was heavy in the air.

Ellison remembered the day Jim Blake had left their ranch on the Brazos, and the way they had flipped a coin to see who would go with the cattle and who would stay. Something Jim had written in his letter crossed Ellison's mind then: "If that two-bit piece had come up heads instead of tails, it might have been you who met her, Drew."

He saw the livery stable sign and rode in that direction. A young man in cowpuncher garb was leaning against the front of the

barn, idly watching the street. Ellison returned his brief nod and rode through the double doors, into the smell of hay and horses and leather. A runty oldster, using a brush on a blaze-faced bay, stopped working and gave Ellison a mild survey.

"Howdy," the hostler said.

Ellison nodded and stepped down, handing him the reins. "I'll be around a spell. Give my horse a rubdown and a good feed."

"I like horses," the hostler said, stroking the gelding's nose. "Get along with them better than I do with most humans."

Ellison slapped some of the dust from his clothes, and asked, "Where'll I find the sheriff?"

"His office is about a block down. He'll either be there or at the Bell Café, across the street. Just about any hour of the day you'll find him at one of those two places."

"Doesn't get around much, huh?"

"Laziest cuss you ever saw, that Barney Tibbs." The liveryman turned his head and sent a stream of tobacco juice onto the hay-strewn floor. "He just eats and sleeps and lives on the rep he built a long time ago."

Ellison said, "See you later," and started to leave.

"Only one hotel," the hostler said. "But the beds aren't bad. You'll get better grub, though, at the Bell Café."

"Thanks," Ellison said over his shoulder.

He went out and turned up the street, remembering what the Mexican woman had said about a girl named Lea Hagen. Jim had loved her, had fallen hard, according to his letter, and Jim had died. But Ellison knew there had to be more to it than that.

DOWN the street he came to a saloon and turned in, feeling the need of a drink. He had been in the saddle since sun up, and had ridden a lot of hot, dusty miles. The saloon was crowded, but he found a spot at the bar and ordered a beer.

"If you don't ease up," a man down the bar said to his companion, "you'll be sleeping it off before the shindig gets started."

The man next to him laughed. "You know me better'n that. I can drink all the likker Sam's got in this place and still be in shape to do my share of fancy stepping."

Both men were weaving, Ellison saw, having a fine time. Presently they began to scuffle, and one of them gave the other a playful shove. He lost his balance and lurched against Ellison, knocking him into the man on his left. This man was taking a drink and the whisky sloshed onto the bar.

"Sorry," Ellison said.

The man shoved back from the bar, cursing.

"An accident," Ellison said.

Narrowed eyes sized him up. "You look like a Texan to me."

"Anything wrong with that?" Ellison asked.

"Yeah. I'm getting a bellyful of you yahoos throwing your weight around."

"Aw, come on, Cal," the bartender said. "Have another drink and forget it."

Ellison smiled, trying to pass it off, but he could see that Cal didn't want it that way. He was a lean, thick-necked man, with pale eyes that held a wicked glint.

Ellison drained his mug and started to turn away, but Cal laid a hand on his arm. "I'm not through talking to you yet."

"Guess you're pretty good at talking."

Somebody snickered, and Cal's face got red. "I can do more than talk," he said. "I'll show you."

Ellison knew what was coming, and saw no point in getting in a knock-down drag-out fight just to please some mean-tempered gent. Without giving Cal time to get set, he threw his left fist hard into the man's stomach. The blow bent the other man over and, while he was in that position, Ellison hit him again, this time on the jaw. Cal went down in the sawdust and lay still.

"Kind of hard to reason with," Ellison said to the bartender.

The man in the white apron nodded. "Name's Cal North. Gets a little ornery sometimes when he's got booze in him."

Ellison paid for his beer and walked out, stopping on the porch long enough to roll a cigarette. Two men were standing on the steps talking.

He heard one of them say, "Here she comes, Ben."

It was a buckboard rolling down the street that held their attention, Ellison saw. A man and a woman were on the seat.

Ellison heard the man called Ben say, "Reckon she's coming in for the shindig. You going to ask her for a dance, Hank?"

"Not me," Hank said. "I don't aim to get caught in the same room with her."

Ben laughed.

"Are you scared you'll be number three on her list?"

"I'm not taking any chances," Hank said soberly. "You can bet on that."

Without taking his eyes off the buckboard Ellison said, "I take it that's Lea Hagen?"

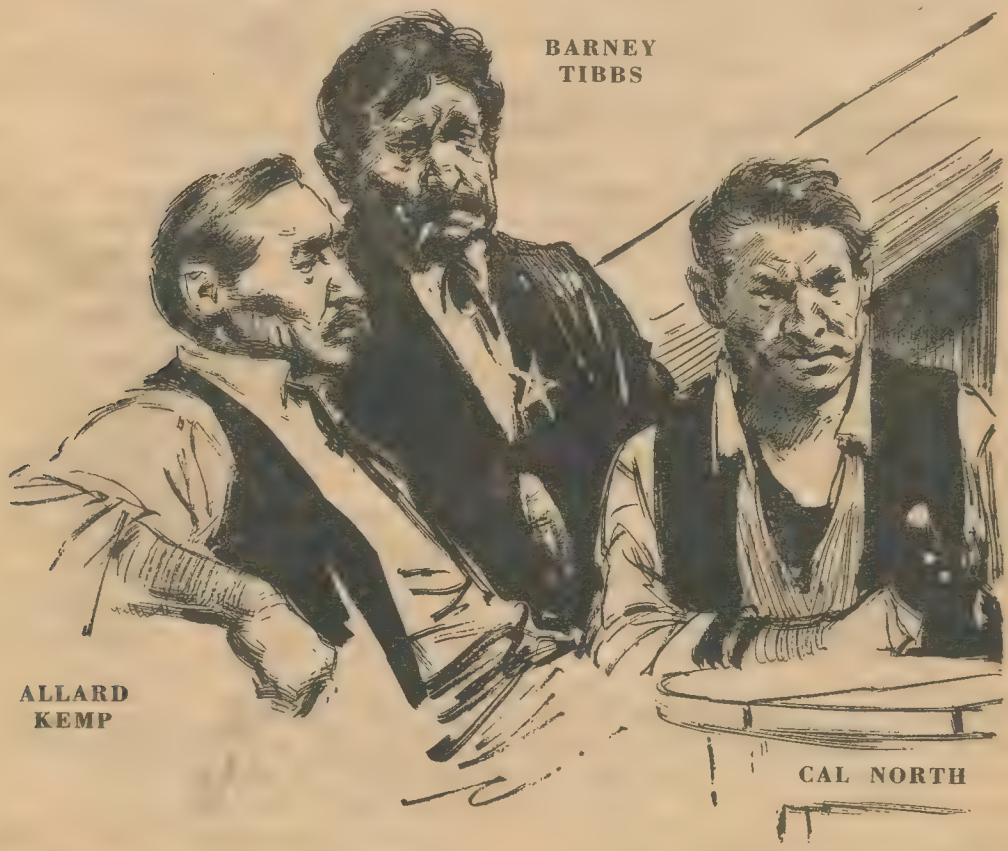
"So you've heard about her already?"

"A little. Who's the man with her?"

"Her partner, Fred Ganes. But listen, mister—if you've got some notion of getting to know her better, you'd best forget it."

"Thanks for the advice," Ellison said. "I'll keep it in mind."

He left the porch and turned up the street,



ELLISON'S eyes stayed on the girl in the buckboard. With her shoulders back and her head high, she was a straight, slender figure with afternoon sunlight striking her dark hair. As the buckboard passed the saloon she turned, and her gaze touched Ellison but did not linger.

He stood motionless, an odd feeling inside him. The men on the porch were regarding him with faint amusement. One of them said, "Some looker, isn't she, stranger?"

still watching the buckboard. It had pulled up in front of the hotel and Fred Ganes was helping the girl down. They stood talking for a moment, then the girl turned and went into the hotel.

The sheriff's office was a small adobe building. A short, fat man with a bald head was standing in the doorway.

"You Barney Tibbs?" Ellison asked.

"That's right. Barney Tibbs, sheriff of Maca county. Don't believe I know you."

"The name's Ellison. You wrote me a letter."

"I remember now. Found your name and address in a little black book Blake was carrying on him."

"Your letter didn't tell me much."

"I didn't know much to write," Tibbs said, rubbing the top of his head. "Anyway, if we're going to talk, let's go inside so I can get off my feet. Blamed things give me trouble all the time."

Ellison followed Tibbs into the office. There were two cells at the back, both of them empty. The furniture consisted of a rolltop desk, three chairs, and a sagging cot.

Tibbs walked over to his desk and sat down, his bulk filling the swivel chair. "Too bad about your partner," he said. "Seemed like a nice feller. But that's the way it goes."

Ellison remained standing, and reached for his tobacco sack. "Any idea who killed him?"

"Not a solitary thing to go on. Somebody found him on the edge of town one night with a bullet in his back. I went out there and scouted around, but whoever did it didn't leave any sign."

"Is that all the looking you did?" Ellison asked with a trace of irritation.

"Getting too heavy to sit in a saddle any more, so I don't go chasing around the coun-

try. But then, I don't need to. May take a little time, but I'll get whoever did it."

"You figure that one of these days they'll come in and give themselves up?" Ellison said dryly.

Tibbs smiled, showing no resentment. "Only had one feller do that in the thirty years I've been wearing a badge. No, it isn't likely he'll give himself up, but I'll nab him."

"How?"

"Just by keeping my eyes and ears open. You might be surprised how much a man can learn without ever getting out of town—especially if he's on friendly terms with a good bartender. Fellers talk around a saloon."

IMPATIENCE was growing in Ellison; it put a roughness in his voice. "What about this Hagen girl?"

Tibbs rubbed his head with a slow, circular motion. "Lea owns the Broken H out on lonesome creek. She never went out with the boys much till after her old man died about a year ago. Then she and Paul Wanton started taking rides together, and folks figured it wouldn't be long till they got married."

"But they didn't?"

"No. Paul was found one night with a bullet in him, and since he was well liked and there was no reason for anybody to kill him, folks began to wonder. Still, nobody said much till your partner came along and the same thing happened to him. That's when the talk really started and men began shying away from Lea like she had the plague."

"She supposed to have some kind of curse on her?" There was derision in Ellison's tone.

"There are some who think so," Tibbs said. "Course I don't hold with the spooky talk, but I've figured every angle and there wasn't any reason for those fellers to be killed."

"I don't know about the other one," Ellison said. "But there was a reason for Jim to be killed. You said in your letter that he was carrying that cattle sale money on him."

Tibbs nodded. "Blake made his deal after the bank closed, and the buyer paid off in cash. I tried to get Blake to leave the money at the saloon. They've got a safe there."

"Jim was always a little rattle-headed, but he promised me he wouldn't take a chance with that money."

Tibbs rubbed his head again and said, "He was going to take it to the saloon like I told him to, but before he got there Lea Hagen rode in. They talked a while, then Blake got his horse from the stable and they rode out of town together."

"And Jim didn't come back from that ride?"

"No."

"What did the girl have to say about it?"

"Claimed Blake was still alive when she left him. Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't. All I know for sure is that I haven't been able to dig up anything to prove Lea isn't telling the truth. Like I said, it may take time, but I'll find the answers one of these days. When I do, one of the cells back there won't be empty."

Ellison looked down at the lawman. "Time's something I haven't got, Sheriff, so I intend to do some digging on my own."

"I know how you feel about your partner," Tibbs said, meeting Ellison's level stare. "But revenge is a bad thing."

"I didn't come here looking for revenge," Ellison told him. "Sure, I want to see Jim's killer get what's coming to him, but I'll leave that to the law. I've got a ranch to look after and I need to get back, but I also need the ten thousand dollars."

"A lot of folks could use that kind of money, Ellison."

"Most of the money belonged to our neighbors, folks who took a chance on us and let us have the cattle. We were just starting out, working on a shoestring, and we figured our share of the money would finally get us started."

Tibbs sighed heavily. "I've got a hunch the dinero won't be easy to find."

"Maybe not, but I'm going to do some looking."

"That's all right with me," Tibbs said, getting to his feet. "If you find out anything, let me know." He took his watch out and glanced at it. "Reckon if I'm going to avoid the supper rush, I better be getting over to the café."

Ellison thought, he's a man more interested in eating and sitting in an easy chair than in finding a killer.

THE sheriff followed him to the door. As Ellison stepped outside he saw a man standing on the walk.

"Howdy, Allard," Tibbs said. "This is a friend of that Blake feller that was killed a while back. Mr. Ellison, meet Mr. Kemp. He owns the Wagon Wheel outfit west of here."

Kemp was a big man, heavy through the shoulders. His face was square and ruddy, and his smile seemed to come easily. He said, "I want to apologize for that rider of mine that you had the run-in with."

"The fellow called Cal?"

"Cal North," Kemp said, still smiling. "A good man with cattle, but a little hot-headed. He gets out of line sometimes when he's had too much to drink."

Something about this man bothered Ellison. He seemed to be trying a little too hard to smooth things over. Ellison said, "It didn't amount to much."

"I raked Cal over the coals when I heard about it," Kemp said. "I get along with everybody, and I expect my riders to do the same."

Ellison glanced toward the hotel. "Guess I better get a room and wash some of this trail dust off." He nodded to the two men and started across the street.

"In case you're interested," Tibbs called after him, "there's going to be a dance at the town hall tonight."

Ellison went on without answering.

The front of the hotel was the only part of the building that had been painted. After observing the shade of brown, Ellison decided it would have been better if a brush hadn't touched it at all.

He signed the register, paid in advance, and asked, "What room does Miss Hagen have?"

The clerk, a small, sad-eyed man, was reaching for a key on the board behind him. He turned and looked at Ellison, showing interest for the first time. "Room Fourteen," he said, wetting his lips. "But, mister, let me tell you something—"

"I won't get too close to her," Ellison said with a wry smile.

He reached across the desk, took the key out of the clerk's hand, and turned toward the stairs. His own room was at the end of the hall, but before reaching it he came to number fourteen. He rapped lightly and heard footsteps as someone crossed the room. The door opened and the girl he had seen in the buckboard stood there.

"Miss Hagen?"

"Yes." She had one hand on the doorknob, and he noticed that the dark material of her dress was pulled tight across high, firm breasts. Sun and wind had browned her skin, but had not roughened it. Her mouth was wide and her lips were full—the kind of a mouth, he thought, that was made for kissing.

"My name's Ellison," he said.

Something flickered in her green eyes. Fear, maybe; he wasn't sure. She said, "You're Jim's partner. I was wondering if you'd come."

"I pulled out as soon as I got a letter from the sheriff."

"Come in," she said, "and we can talk."

He stepped past her and walked to a window that opened onto the street. The window was open and noises drifted up—the rattle of a passing wagon, the hard beat of hoofs, and a rider's rebel yell. There were two chairs, but they both remained standing.

ELLISON looked at her, aware of her appeal, telling himself that no man could see her and not be stirred. Her eyes were the color of jade, and the lashes were long. They were eyes that a man could get lost in.

"You've heard the talk," she said, "and now you're wondering if Jim died because of me."

His eyes stayed on her face, steady and searching. "You rode out of town with him the night he was killed."

If there was guilt in her it didn't show. She said, "I know what you're probably thinking. Jim was carrying a lot of money on him and I got him to leave town, took him out where I had someone waiting to kill him."

"Why did you stop him from putting the money in a safe?"

"I didn't know he had the money on him, not until we were out of town and he told me about it."

"Seems kind of strange that you should appear on the scene right after Jim sold the cattle."

Faint resentment stirred in her eyes. Then

it was gone and she said, "Jim had asked me to marry him, to go back to Texas with him, and I came to give him his answer."

Ellison reached for his tobacco sack without taking his eyes off her. He said, "You didn't see anybody following you?"

"No. Jim rode about halfway home with me. Then I went on alone and he started back to town."

She was the kind, Ellison thought, who would make a good actress—a woman who could keep a straight face while lying through her teeth. He felt like telling her he didn't give a damn about her romance with Jim Blake, that it wasn't sentiment that had brought him here.

He had met Jim after the war between the states. They had worked for the same outfit a while, two men who hit it off, who both wanted the same thing—a ranch of their own. But it was a business proposition and while friendship had grown out of it, Ellison didn't intend to throw away what it had taken thirty years to gain by getting too worked up over the killing. He couldn't let himself forget everything except seeing to it that somebody paid for Jim's death. Like he had told Barney Tibbs, that was a job for the law.

The girl was saying, "That was the last time I saw Jim alive."

"You didn't hear the shot?"

"No, I didn't know he had been killed until the sheriff told me." She was silent for a moment, looking straight at him. Then she asked, "Mr. Ellison, do I strike you as being the kind who would lead a man to his death?"

"Looks don't tell much."

"I suppose not," she said with faint bitterness. "And then there's that other man who died because of me, so they say. Maybe I'm a witch, Mr. Ellison; that's what some people are saying. I'm a woman put here by the devil to lure men to their deaths."

"What's your side of the story?"

"All I know is that I had nothing to do with those men being killed. In Jim's case the motive could have been robbery, but the other man had no money, and there was no reason for anyone to kill him."

"I'm not interested in that other man, Miss Hagan. What I want to know is what happened to the ten thousand dollars."

Her stare was critical. "Don't you want to find out who killed Jim Blake?"

"Jim's dead and nothing I can do will bring him back. But there are folks down on the Brazos who need their share of that money, who are counting on me to get it back."

"I wish I could help you."

IMPATIENT now, he said, "Are you so well fixed that you couldn't use ten thousand dollars?"

She stiffened, and the resentment was in her eyes again, stronger this time. She said, "You're nothing like Jim. Somehow I expected you to be, after the way he talked."

"You haven't answered my question."

Through tight lips she said, "I didn't take the money and I don't know who did."

"No suspicions, even?"

"None."

"So you can't give me anything to go on?"

"I'm afraid not."

He regarded her for a quiet interval, thinking again how easy it would be to fall in love with her. She had the kind of beauty a man searches for, yet seldom finds.

When he started for the door she said, "No, you're nothing like Jim Blake."

Ellison put his hand on the knob and looked at her over his shoulder. "Sorry I disappointed you."

He went out and turned down the hall to his room, wondering how much she could tell him if she wanted to. In spite of the talk he had heard, it was difficult to believe that she had led two men to their deaths. Still, he told himself she wasn't a shy, innocent little thing. She was a very desirable woman, beautiful—and maybe deadly.

After he had washed, Ellison left his room and went downstairs. On the porch he paused to make a cigarette, and in the act of lighting it his straying glance settled on a man leaning against an awning post in front of the saloon. It was Cal North, the Wagon Wheel rider, and Ellison could feel the weight of his hard eyes.

If I stick around this town long, Ellison thought, I'll have trouble with that one.

With his smoke going he turned up the

street, and ran into Barney Tibbs coming out of the Bell Café. The lawman had a toothpick in one corner of his mouth, and there was a trace of grease on his upper lip.

"Did you talk to the Hagen girl?" Tibbs asked.

"Yes," Ellison said, "but I didn't find out anything."

"Didn't figure you would." The sheriff removed the toothpick and flipped it into the street. "I don't know what to make of that girl."

"Is her ranch making money?"

"Used to when the old man was living, but seems like Lea's had a lot of tough breaks. First one thing and then another, until she finally had to get money at the bank to hold the outfit together."

"Then ten thousand dollars might look pretty good to her?"

The sheriff scowled. "Now hold on, Ellison. Just because Lea's having it a little rough doesn't mean she killed Blake and stole the money."

"How about her partner?"

The lawman shook his head. "Fred Ganes is a mighty fine feller. He's been with Broken H ever since he was a kid. The old man took him in, gave him a home, treated him like his own son."

"That doesn't prove anything Sheriff."

Tibbs's scowl deepened. "Don't you think I've figured all the angles in this thing?"

"All I know for sure, Sheriff, is that the money's still missing."

"And the man that killed Blake and stole it may be in Mexico by now."

"Maybe," Ellison said. He started past and then swung back to ask, "You know a woman named Maria Salazar?"

"Sure, everybody around here knows Maria."

"I talked to her on my way to town."

"Did she tell you that Blake's body was found close to her place?"

Ellison frowned. "No, she didn't mention that."

Tibbs was thoughtful for a moment. Then he said, "She's a funny old girl. Always handing out some creepy talk about somebody." He shifted his weight, winced, and glanced down at his feet. "Got to get off them," he said. "I'll see you around."

ELLISON turned into the café, wondering about Maria Salazar, remembering that she had been about to tell him something and had changed her mind. Since Jim was killed near her place, it was possible she had seen something. If so, why was she keeping quiet about it?

He gave the counter man his order, and heard bits of conversation from some of the customers—men who had come in for the dance and were looking forward to a large evening.

When he had finished eating and was leaving the café, Allard Kemp came in. The Wagon Wheel owner smiled at Ellison and looked as though he wanted to strike up a conversation, but Ellison passed him with a nod and went outside.

It was dark now and lamps had been lighted along the street and in a large, two-story building a half block down. From there came the squeak of a fiddle. A young couple passed in a buggy and Ellison heard the girl's laughter, light and gay.

He stood for a time in front of the cafe, and presently a man and a woman came from the hotel and turned up the street. When they passed beneath a street lamp he saw that it was Lea Hagen and Fred Ganes. Ellison watched them until they had entered the town hall, and he told himself he had used the wrong approach on the girl. He had let her know he was suspicious of her, when it might have been better to lead her to believe he thought she had nothing to do with Jim's death.

Since something seemed to happen to any man who had anything to do with her, why not play along and see what he could find out? With this thought in mind, he crossed the street and walked toward the town hall. The music was loud now, and he could hear the shuffle of feet and a voice calling a square dance. After making his way through the parked rigs, he climbed the stairs and leaned against the wall, watching the couples dance past.

When the music stopped and the floor was

cleared, he saw Lea Hagen sitting on a bench across the room. She was alone, and he noticed that none of the men were going near her. He waited until the music started again, then walked across the room. She was sitting on the bench, watching some of the couples move onto the floor, and he noticed how her hair shone in the lamplight. She was the best looking woman in the hall, he thought, yet none of the men were dancing with her.

When he stopped in front of her, she looked up and he caught a fleeting resentment in her eyes. Then it was gone and she smiled, a warm, slow smile.

"I didn't suppose you'd have time to come to the dance, Mr. Ellison."

He returned the smile. "When I heard the music I couldn't stay away. And right now we're letting it go to waste."

She rose, still smiling, and they moved onto the floor. "I'm sorry," he said, hoping it sounded sincere, "about the way I acted at the hotel."

"It's all right," she said. "I can't blame you for being suspicious, after some of the stories you must have heard about me."

He had come here expecting to find her cool toward him, but she was showing no resentment. Her smile was almost too warm, too friendly for a man she hardly knew. She doesn't like me, he thought, but for some reason she wants me to believe she does. Better watch yourself, Ellison.

He felt eyes following them as they moved about the room, but if Lea was aware of the stares she didn't let on. It was a waltz, an easy-to-dance-to piece, and she seemed to be enjoying herself. She kept smiling up at him and her eyes were half closed, dreamy.

WHEN the music stopped they were close to the orchestra, and Ellison saw that Fred Ganes was leaning against the platform, talking with the guitar player. Lea led Ellison over and introduced him. Ganes was a man in his early thirties, blond and slender.

"You brought Miss Hagen here," Ellison said. "Maybe I'm horning in?"

"Not at all," Ganes assured him. "And now that she's got somebody to talk to, I can amble over and find myself a poker game."

"You see," Lea said teasingly, "He'd rather play cards than dance with me."

Ganes smiled. "I get along with the pasteboards better than I do with the women."

They talked briefly of Jim Blake and then Ganes left, saying he would return before the dance was over. Watching him as he crossed the hall, Ellison wondered what Ganes could tell him about the killing. Maybe he wouldn't know anything, but he was Lea Hagen's partner, so Ellison figured that made him a good suspect.

"I don't know what I'd do without Fred," Lea said. "We were raised together, and he's like a brother to me."

When the music started they danced again, and Ellison was aware of the loveliness he held in his arms. The warmth and the softness of her, and the way she kept looking at him with a half-veiled promise in those green eyes, disturbed him in spite of the fact that he told himself she was putting on an act.

"If you're going to stay in Dormingo a while," Lea said, "maybe you'd like a job?"

"Know where I could find one?"

"The Broken H needs a good man."

"Thanks for the offer," he said. "I'll think it over."

She smiled again, that slow, provocative smile, and Ellison felt the hot flow of blood in his veins. You little wench, he thought—if this is the way you threw yourself at Jim, no wonder he couldn't resist you.

The dance ended and they left the floor. Lea was holding to his arm, staying close to him and letting him feel the warm pressure of her fingers. He knew now why she was playing up to him. She wanted him to take the job, but for what reason? Maybe they wanted to get him away from town, to where it would be easier to kill him.

A bleary-eyed old man came into the hall, paused a moment to make a survey, then shuffled across the room toward Ellison. He was shabbily dressed, a saloon bum by the looks of him, Ellison decided.

"Your name Ellison?" the old man asked.

Ellison nodded.

"The sheriff sent me. He said he'd like to see you right away."

Watching the old man hurry out of the hall, Ellison frowned, wondering what Tibbs had on his mind that couldn't wait. But maybe he had found out something.

"I won't be gone long," Ellison said, smiling at Lea.

She gave him another provocative look. "I'll stay right here till you get back."

Leaving the hall, Ellison dismissed the girl from his mind. As he scanned the street a vague sense of apprehension began to trouble him. Back at the hall there were lights and lanterns, the screech of a fiddle. But the rest of the town seemed quieter than before he had gone to the dance.

THERE was no sign of the old man who had delivered the message. Most of the shops had been closed for the night, but there was lamplight in the sheriff's office. Ellison walked toward it, uneasiness touching him again. He had a feeling he was being watched, yet when he glanced back there was no one in sight.

He went on, the music growing dimmer as the hall fell behind. Now there was only the noise of his bootheels on the plankwalk, a sound that was loud in the silence. Then he heard something else—the squeak of a board as he passed a dark doorway. He stopped suddenly and reached toward his gun, before remembering he had left it at the hotel.

A dark shape lunged from the doorway, catching Ellison before he could twist away. A gun barrel flashed downward in a savage blow against Ellison's head. He staggered, and his hat fell to the ground. Stunned, he felt himself being shoved into the doorway. Twice more the gun barrel landed against his head, vicious blows that brought darkness rushing toward Ellison. He felt his knees buckling, but the man with the gun held him and kept him from falling.

With Ellison only half conscious, the man put his gun away and began to use his fists, ripping, slashing away at Ellison's face. And Ellison, almost out on his feet from the blow on his head, was helpless. He tried to fight off the blackness, tried to get his hands on the man, but the strength wasn't in him.

"Get out of town, buck," a muffled voice was saying. "Get out and don't come back."

Pinned there against the building with his head whirling, Ellison tried to get a look at the man, but he was only a distorted shadow weaving in the pain mist. He didn't know how long it lasted, how long before the man stopped, let him fall, and left him lying there.

He heard a groan, then realized he had made the sound himself. Blood from the wounds in his head had run down across his forehead and onto his face. He was still lying where he had fallen in the doorway. He turned his head, and pain struck at him. Then he heard someone coming along the walk, a man whistling softly. Ellison wondered how long he had lain here, how long since the man who jumped him had gone.

The whistling got louder, then stopped as the man reached the doorway. He bent down and picked up Ellison's Stetson from the walk, frowning as he stared at it. Then Ellison, attempting to sit up, groaned again, and the man on the walk came over to the doorway.

"What's wrong, amigo?" He knelt down to take a closer look. "Oh, it's you."

"Yeah," Ellison said, still woozy as he looked up at Fred Ganes. "It's what's left of me, anyway."

"What happened?"

Ellison staggered up. He leaned against the building and tried to focus his eyes on Ganes. "Somebody jumped me," he muttered. "worked me over with a gun barrel."

"Better let me help you down to the doc's place."

Ellison shook his head. "I'll be all right in a minute."

"From the looks of you, I kind of doubt it," Ganes said. "You see who it was?"

"After that gun barrel was laid on my head, I didn't see much of anything."

GANES glanced along the street. "Any idea why you were jumped?"

Some of the blood had gotten in Ellison's eyes. He wiped it out and said, "Somebody wants me out of town, maybe, and they figured this would let me know what I can expect if I stay."

"I hear you had a run-in with Cal North

at the saloon, got the best of him. I can tell you Cal's not the kind to forget something like that."

"Maybe," Ellison said, wondering if Ganes wanted him to believe it was North. "You heading back to the dance so soon?"

Ganes nodded. "I couldn't get a card game started."

Maybe you didn't try very hard, Ellison thought. Wanting to throw a scare into me could have been what was in your mind when you left the hall. You could have hired the saloon bum to deliver the fake message. These thoughts were in Ellison's mind, but he told himself it was too soon to let Ganes know that he was suspicious of him.

Ellison glanced toward the hall. "I told Miss Hagen I'd be back, but you'd better tell her I can't make it."

"Sure you don't want to have the doc take a look at you?"

Ellison shook his head. Then he asked, "What do you make of all this talk going around about the girl with the boothill kiss?"

Ganes shrugged. "You know how a thing like that gets started. One person tells it and the next one builds it up, and pretty soon they've got some folks believing it."

"Two men have wanted to marry her," Ellison said, watching Ganes closely. "Both of them are dead."

"I've tried to figure it out," Ganes said, "but right now I'm as much in the dark as anybody else."

When Ganes had started for the hall, Ellison turned toward the hotel. The clerk was asleep behind the desk, and he didn't stir as Ellison passed him and climbed the stairs to his room. When he had washed his face he considered going out to look for the man who had delivered the message. But he had a hunch the man would be hard to find right now. Likely he would hide out somewhere, hoping that Ellison would leave town.

By the time Ellison reached the door, Big Sam was racing away

He was looking at his bruised features in the cracked bureau mirror when a knock sounded on the door. A woman's voice, low and urgent, called, "Drew, it's me, Lea."

"The door's not locked," he said.

She entered and came quickly to where he was standing. Her cheeks were pale and she was breathing hard. "Fred told me."

"I'm all right," he said, wondering if the concern in her eyes were genuine. "They didn't figure to kill me—not this time."

"Let me put some cold towels on your head. It will help take the swelling down."

"I'll be all right in the morning."

"You're not going to let them frighten you away?"

He shook his head without taking his eyes from her face.

"I'm glad," she whispered, and suddenly she was in his arms. He hadn't reached for her, but she was there and he held her, doubts and suspicions gone from his mind for a moment, crowded out by desire. The smell of her hair, her warmth and softness were too much to resist. When she tipped her head back he kissed her long and hard, and felt his desire mounting as her lips responded.

At last Lea stepped back, avoiding his eyes as she turned toward the door. Motionless, Ellison watched her, and once more he wondered what was going on back of those green eyes. What kind of game was she playing? She had turned on a lot of charm for his benefit, and yet somehow she didn't strike him as being the kind of girl who would throw herself at a man.

With her hand on the doorknob, Lea glanced back. "I'll be leaving for the ranch early in the morning."

"About the job," he said. "If the offer's still open, I'll take it."

She didn't look happy about his decision. There was something close to regret in her eyes, but she smiled and said, "Anyone can tell you how to find Broken H."

SHE went out and he stood looking at the door, telling himself she had played up to him at the dance to get him to take the job. She had come here for the same reason. But why did she want him on the ranch when she knew he was suspicious of her?

Remembering the man who had jumped him, Ellison got his gun, strapped it on and went out. He saw a crack of light under Lea's door and, when he paused, heard someone moving around the room. Evidently she had not gone back to the dance.

He left the hotel and crossed the street to the saloon. There was a fair-sized crowd in the barroom. He saw Cal North leaning against one end of the mahogany, staring morosely into an empty shot glass.

Allard Kemp, the Wagon Wheel owner, was playing poker with three other men. There was a small stack of chips in front of him and he fingered them idly, showing little interest in the game. Ellison passed the table without stopping, and went on to the bar. He stopped beside North and the man, seeing him, began to scowl.

"Somebody jumped me a little while ago," Ellison said steadily. "I didn't see who it was, but I thought I'd let you know."

North's hard eyes fastened on Ellison. He said, "When I jump you, mister, it'll be right out in the open where you can see it."

"Can I count on that?"

"You're damned right you can."

Talk in the barroom had died down, and Ellison could feel the men watching them. Now Allard Kemp came across the room, hurrying as though he knew trouble was ready to break.

"All right, Cal," Kemp said angrily. "I've had about enough out of you."

North said sullenly, "I wasn't doing anything, but this feller seems to think I was."

"I could be wrong," Ellison said, "but I just wanted to pass the word along. The next time somebody tries to bend a gun barrel over my head, he may find himself with a bullet in his belly."

Kemp stared at North disapprovingly. "I think you'd better hit for the ranch and sober up. And this is the last time I'm warning you, Cal. Either quit stirring up trouble, or you'll find yourself without a job."

North glanced at Ellison, then turned and tramped out of the saloon. Watching him go, Kemp frowned and said, "If he weren't a top hand, I'd have fired him a long time ago." The cattleman turned to Ellison. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Thanks," Ellison said. "Just one."

Kemp was smiling now as he called to the bartender. When they had been served the rancher said, "Too bad about your partner. I didn't get a chance to meet him, but I saw him around town."

"If he hadn't met a girl here," Ellison said, trying to feel the rancher out, "he might still be alive."

Kemp took a sip of his whisky and set the glass on the bar. "I don't know what to make of Lea. Of course I don't believe all this talk you hear, but it's enough to make a man wonder." He had another drink and rubbed his lips together. "You figuring on sticking around a while, Ellison?"

"Until I find out what happened to ten thousand dollars. I may be here for quite a spell." Ellison drained his glass and said, "Thanks for the drink."

Kemp smiled again. "If you get out my way, stop in."

Ellison left the saloon and turned toward the hotel, thinking again that Allard Kemp was trying a little too hard to be friendly.

THE next morning when Ellison went to the Bell Café, Barney Tibbs was sitting on a stool sipping a cup of coffee. "Thought if I hung around long enough," the sheriff said, "You'd be in, and it'd save me having to climb those hotel steps." He paused and looked closely at Ellison. "What happened to your face?"

"A fellow brought me word last night that you wanted to see me, a yarn somebody cooked up to get me away from the dance."

"Why'd they want to do that?"

"Because they were afraid I might learn something and they wanted to scare me out before I had a chance."

Tibbs shook his head, then said, "I've got news for you, something you'll be glad to hear because it means you won't have to stay here and take a chance on getting a bullet in you."

"What do you mean?" Ellison asked.

The sheriff pulled a brown paper sack out of his pocket and laid it on the counter. "There's your ten thousand dollars, every dime of it."

Unbelieving, Ellison looked at the sack, then at the lawman.

"Go ahead, take a look," Tibbs said. "I'm not joshing you."

Ellison stared at him. "Where'd it come from?"

Tibbs took another sip of coffee. "Remember that woman you talked to on your way to town?"

"Maria Salazar?"

The lawman nodded. "She brought the money over to my office this morning."

"How'd she get it?"

"Well, seems she heard a shot the night Blake was killed, and went out to have a look. She didn't see the killer, but she found Blake on the ground, already dead."

"And he had the money on him?"

"He was carrying it in a moneybelt. Maria couldn't see any reason why she shouldn't have it. She told me she burned the moneybelt, hid the money in her house, and said nothing about it."

"And then I came along and it got to bothering her?"

Tibbs nodded again. "She said she lay awake all night thinking about it, hating to part with the money. This morning she decided she couldn't keep it, so she turned it over to me to give to you."

Ellison sat there looking at the sack and thinking of his neighbors back on the Brazos, small-spread cowmen who needed their share of that ten thousand. He thought of the ranch he and Jim Blake had started, two men going out on their own.

The sheriff drained his cup and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "Well, Ellison, you got what you come after. Now you can head back to Texas."

When Ellison didn't answer, Tibbs spoke again. "Nothing to keep you here now, is there?"

"No," Ellison said. He was thinking of Lea, remembering he had told her he would take a job on Broken H. He had thought she might lead him to the money, that if he were around where he could watch her she might make a slip. Now he had the money and, like the sheriff said, there was nothing to keep him here now.

"Good java," Tibbs said. "Think I'll have another cup. You'd better put that dinero in the bank."

Ellison stared thoughtfully at the sack containing the money. "If it wasn't the money they were after," he said musingly, "why was he killed?"

"The same reason the other feller was killed—because they were spending too much time around Lea Hagen."

"You don't believe that, Sheriff?"

"A lot of folks do."

"I know. You got any idea who started that talk in the first place?"

Tibbs shook his head. "It's got me, but I'll figure it out one of these days. When I do I'll let you know—I'll write you a letter and tell you all about it."

AFTER he had eaten, Ellison deposited the ten thousand in the bank, and went to the livery stable, telling himself there was no need to stay here any longer. Maybe he should ride out and tell Lea he wouldn't be taking the job. But he knew he was only looking for an excuse to see her again, and that wasn't good.

Play it smart, Ellison. Saddle up and head for Texas.

On his way out of town he stopped at the cemetery and walked among the headboards until he found the one bearing Jim Blake's name. His face solemn, he stood for a moment looking at the mound of dirt, thinking. Two men had started out to build a ranch. Now one of them was dead, and somewhere on this range was a killer. Finding that killer, Ellison told himself again, was a job for the law. That was why men like Barney Tibbs were elected to office.

Thinking of the fat, lazy sheriff, Ellison knew the man's chances of finding the killer were slim. Tibbs spent most of his time in town, waiting for someone to solve his cases for him.

Ellison left the cemetery, knowing that he shouldn't have come. For, now that he had, he couldn't go back to the Brazos without first trying to square things for Jim Blake.

When he reached the main trail he saw a rider coming toward him from the direction of the hills. It was Lea Hagen, astride a light-footed bay. She wore men's clothes this time, levis and boots and a blue cotton shirt. But it was the expression on her face that held Ellison.

"I wanted to catch you before you came out to the ranch," she said as she reined in beside him. "I've changed my mind about giving you a job."

'Maybe somebody changed it for you."

She shook her head. "No, I just couldn't go through with it after what happened to you last night."

The sultriness he had seen in her eyes at the dance was gone now, and there was only fear, a deep, haunting fear that he knew was genuine.

He said, "You were stringing me along last night, being real nice to me."

"I was trying to live up to the name people have given me."

"No, I think you did it because you wanted me to take the job."

She nodded slowly. "Jim told me you were a man who could take care of himself, that you were good with a gun. And I thought if I played up to you maybe you'd help me. I didn't stop to think that I might get you killed."

"I'll take that chance."

"No, Drew. Go back to your ranch in Texas. Leave here before you end up being killed like Jim was."

"I thought I could do that," he said soberly. "I thought the money was all that mattered. But I've changed my mind."

She stared at him searchingly. Looking at her now, Ellison wondered how he could have been suspicious of her. Those dark shadows in her eyes told a story of fear and desperation.

Ellison explained how Maria Salazar had returned the money. When he finished, Lea said, "Then there's nothing to hold you here now."

He glanced back at the cemetery, remembering the mound of dirt, and he said in a low tone, "The ties between Jim and me were stronger than I figured."

Her eyes were intent upon his face. "Is it Jim you're thinking of, or is it me?"

"Maybe it's both of you."

"Don't lose your head over that kiss last night," she said. "It was part of my act."

He smiled faintly. "Figured it was. But just the same I'm sticking around a while, so you might as well give me the job."

She regarded him for a moment in silence,

and he caught a flicker of hope in her eyes. Then it was gone and she said heavily, "It may get you nothing but a bullet in the back."

"We'll see," he said. "Let's take a look at the ranch."

THEY rode back the way Lea had come, following a trail that led to the hills. During the two-hour ride Lea did most of the talking. She told him about her father. He had built his ranch with longhorns, and had refused to listen to Fred Ganes's telling him there would come a day when it would be hard to find a market for the gaunt Texas steers.

Fred, Lea said, was just fifteen when he came to Broken H. A homeless stray, he had been taken in by Jess Hagen and treated as one of the family. Now Lea's parents were both dead and there was only she and Fred and one rider.

Ellison asked, "Did your dad and Ganes ever have any trouble?"

"Nothing serious. For a while before Dad died he was sick most of the time, and it didn't take much to make him blow up. He would get mad sometimes when Fred suggested improvements for the ranch. He seemed to think that Fred was trying to tell him what to do. But it wasn't so."

"You think you know Ganes pretty well, huh?"

"I should. I was raised with him."

"Sometimes you can be around a person a long time and not know what he's really like."

"If you're trying to tie Fred in with what's happened, you're wrong."

"Maybe," Ellison said, shifting his weight in the saddle. "But we've got to look for somebody with a reason for not wanting you to get married."

"Fred wouldn't have a reason."

Ellison was thoughtful for a time. Then he asked, "Did your dad leave Ganes half the ranch?"

"He planned to but, just before he died, Dad flew into one of his rages and ended up changing his will so that Fred got nothing. It wasn't right, but Fred has told me it doesn't matter. And he knows that as long as I own the ranch it's as much his as it is mine."

"But suppose you got married?"

"Why, Fred would go on running the place."

"Maybe he figures your husband might have different ideas. Then, too, Fred might want to marry you himself."

Lea shook her head. "I told you, Fred's like a brother to me."

Ellison recalled the attack on him last night. He remembered the way Fred Ganes had left the dance and a little later was on his way back. Fred could be the man he was looking for, all right. Then Ellison caught himself, realizing that he was jumping to conclusions.

A mile from Broken H headquarters they met two riders, Fred Ganes and a ranch hand named Big Sam, a mountain of a man with a broad face, empty of expression.

"Looking for strays," Ganes explained.

"Mr. Ellison's going to work for us, Fred," Lea said.

"That's fine," Ganes said. "We can sure use another hand."

The man called Big Sam made no comment, but Ellison had a feeling he was being watched with more than casual interest.

"I've got work to do at the house," Lea said. "You can show Ellison around the place, Fred." She lifted her reins and smiled at Ellison. "I'll see you later."

They watched her ride away, then Ganes turned to Big Sam. "You keep working the brush and see what you find."

The big man nodded, and rode off without a word. Looking after him, Ellison murmured, "I'll bet he could break a man in two with those hands of his."

Ganes nodded. "I guess he could if he took a notion."

"Been with you long?"

"Only a few months. Just a big, dumb drifter. Said he'd been working for an outfit up in Wyoming."

"Reminds me of a feller I knew once," Ellison said, reaching for his tobacco sack. "Couldn't think for himself. Made you think of a big dog, the way he followed his older brother around. His brother looked out for him, saw that he had a place to sleep, some-

thing to eat, and this big cuss would do anything his brother told him to."

"That right?"

ELLISON nodded as he shaped up his smoke. "Folks used to say that all the brother would have to do was tell the big one to take a gun and blow his brains out, and he would have done it."

"Funny," Ganes said. "What makes some men the way they are?"

Ellison thumbed a match alight. "Some are dumb and some are smart, and the smart ones have a habit of using the dumb ones."

"That's the way it goes," Ganes said, lifting his reins. "Come on and I'll show you around."

They rode for a while, with Ganes making idle talk.

"Good range," Ellison commented. "Never saw any better."

Ganes looked out across the rolling land, his gaze settling on a small bunch of cattle grazing at the base of a hill. "Longhorns," he said with disgust. "Stuff that came out of the Texas brush country."

"A lot of ranches have been started with longhorns."

"Sure, but if you're going to get ahead you've got to breed shorthorns. I tried to tell the old man that, but he wouldn't listen."

"Stubborn, huh?"

Ganes nodded. "We've got the grass here, and plenty of water. This could be the best ranch in the country."

Ellison studied him. "You sound like that's important to you."

"I've put a lot of sweat into this place."

"Jim Blake put a lot of the same stuff into an outfit down on the Brazos. Now Jim's dead."

Ganes took his eyes off the cattle and faced Ellison. "And you've come here to find his killer. Maybe you took the job because you think I had something to do with the killing. Is that what's in your mind?"

"I'm not overlooking any bets."

"If you think it's me, you're barking up the wrong fence post."

Ellison gave him a sober regard, wishing he

[*Turn page*]

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could read what was in Ganes's mind. He was thinking, tell me somebody with a better reason for killing two men who were after the girl you maybe want for yourself.

As though he could guess what Ellison was thinking, Ganes said, "It's got me stumped, the same as everybody else. Somehow, it just doesn't make sense."

"Those men died for a reason," Ellison said. "That much I'm sure of."

"The fact that both of them were sweet on Lea might not mean a thing," Ganes said. "They could have been killed for different reasons."

Ellison nodded. "But if a third man were killed on account of her, there wouldn't be much doubt about it."

Ganes was frowning as they rode on.

That night after supper Ellison, Ganes, and Big Sam sat around the bunkhouse. Ganes played solitaire, making idle talk while he studied the cards. Big Sam had little to say. He sat on the side of his bunk and kept cracking his knuckles until the sound began to grate on Ellison's nerves.

"Bothered me too at first," Ganes said, turning up a black king of diamonds. "But I've gotten used to it."

"Even kind of looks like that feller I knew," Ellison murmured, looking at the big man.

"What's that?" Ganes asked.

"Nothing," Ellison said. "Just thinking out loud."

SAM stopped cracking his knuckles. He got up and rubbed the back of his neck, and said, "I haven't been to town for a whole month. Think I'll ride in and see what's doing."

"Nothing doing on a week night," Ganes said, without looking up from his cards.

"Getting low on tobacco," Sam said.

Ellison had a feeling the big man was being very careful not to look at him.

When Sam had gone, Ganes turned up another card, then yawned and got to his feet. "Think I'll turn in," he said, and started unbuttoning his shirt.

"Pretty early," Ellison said, walking to the door. He opened it and stood looking across the yard at the lamplighted window of the house. He saw Sam ride away from the corral and take the trail toward town. Soon the rider was lost in the darkness, and Ellison returned his attention to the house.

"If you're not sleepy," Ganes said, "Lea would probably like some company."

Ellison said over his shoulder, "You're reading my mind."

Ganes laughed. Then he sobered and said, "I think you're falling for her, Ellison. I could see the way you looked at her during supper."

"Maybe I am," Ellison said, his eyes still on the house. "Suppose I married her and took her back to Texas with me?"

"If it were what Lea wanted, it'd be all right with me."

Ellison turned and looked at him, wondering if Ganes were telling the truth. There was nothing on the man's face to show that he was lying, but Ellison wasn't satisfied. He told himself that Ganes might be trying to find out how he felt about Lea.

Ganes, sitting on the side of his bunk now, yawned again and started to remove his boots. "See you in the morning," he said.

Ellison went out, his mind filled with doubts and suspicions as he walked toward the house. Lea was sitting on the porch, and she smiled when she saw him and touched the chair next to her's. Ellison sat down and looked at her, seeing again the troubled shadows in her eyes.

"I was thinking of you, Drew," she said quietly. "Thinking of you and blaming myself for letting you take the job."

"I would have stuck around even if you hadn't given me the job."

They were quiet for a time, and Ellison's eyes stayed on the bunkhouse. The lamp was out now, but he told himself that didn't mean Fred Ganes had gone to bed. If Ganes wanted to find out how he felt about Lea, why not show him something?

"Let's take a ride," Ellison suggested.

Lea looked at him quickly. "You've got something on your mind."

"A lot of things," Ellison murmured. "Come on."

They walked to the corral, Lea watching

him curiously while he saddled two horses. As they were riding out, Ellison glanced at the bunkhouse. A shadow moved at the side of the building, and Ellison knew they were being watched. Evidently Ganes had slipped outside while Ellison was on his way to the house.

Ellison looked at Lea and knew from her expression that she had seen nothing. He decided not to mention it to her.

She led the way into the hills, hitting an easy pace. When he kept glancing over his shoulder at their back-trail, Lea frowned and asked, "Do you think we're being followed?"

"Just a hunch."

The girl reined in on a small rise and looked back the way they had come, her eyes scanning the darkness. "I don't see anything."

"I could be wrong," Ellison said.

She turned and looked at him, closely, searchingly. "You're thinking it might be Fred. That's what you had in mind when you suggested we take a ride."

He didn't want to frighten her by saying that he was certain they were being watched as they had left the ranch. "I guess I'm getting jumpy, imagining things."

LEA looked again into the darkness. "If you knew Fred as well as I do, you'd be sure he's not the one behind the killings."

"But I don't know him that well," Ellison said.

He saw the distress in her eyes, and smiled meagerly. "Let's go on. It's nice night."

She gave him a long, sober regard, but his smile had broadened. After a moment her face smoothed out and she smiled back at him.

They rode on a short distance. When they came to a creek, Lea stopped. She dismounted and walked to the edge of the water. With one last glance into the darkness, Ellison stepped down and joined her.

"I came here with Jim one night," Lea said, looking out across the water. "It was here that he asked me to marry him."

"He wrote me a letter," Ellison said. "Told me he might be bringing a wife home with him."

"I liked him," Lea said. "He was always laughing and full of fun."

"But you turned him down?"

"Not the first time he asked me. I told him I'd think about it, and I was tempted to take him up, because it would have been a means of getting away from this range, away from the whispers and the accusing looks."

She kept staring into the darkness. "People say I'm a bad woman, Ellison, and I'll never live it down."

"Of course you will."

"No, they've built something up and, even if you find the man who killed Jim, it won't change their minds about me."

A faint sound came from behind them and Ellison stiffened, but he didn't look around. Instead he pulled Lea to him, wanting it to appear to whoever was watching them that this was why they had come here.

He held her briefly, his mind not on romance, and then he whispered, "Walk back to the horses."

She obeyed, though some of the color had gone from her face.

Ellison forced himself to stand motionless. He knew he was making a target of himself, but it was a chance he was willing to take. His nerves were taut and he could almost feel the eyes on his back. Then a gun roared, and he dropped to the ground as a bullet whipped past him. When the next shot came his own gun was in his hand. He fired at the red flash that bloomed in a brush thicket up the bank.

He lay flat on the ground for a moment, hearing nothing but the sound of the creek. When no more shots came he began to work his way toward the brush. Slowly, cautiously he moved through the darkness. Then the sudden drum of hoofs reached him and he got up, running the rest of the way to the thicket.

He plunged through the brush and came out in a small clearing where evidently the ambusher had left his mount. Ellison had a glimpse of the fleeing rider, just a shadowy shape in the darkness. He raised his gun and then lowered it, knowing he would only be wasting bullets.

He holstered his gun and listened to the receding hoofbeats, knowing the rider was going in the direction of Broken H. When he

turned around, Lea was running toward him.

"Drew, are you all right?"

"Missed me both times," he told her.

She stared into the darkness, and he caught a fleeting doubt in her eyes. "It couldn't have been Fred," she said, as though she were trying to convince herself.

"He cut loose at me from the brush over there," Ellison said. "Let's take a look."

Lea followed him into the thicket, quiet while he knelt down and struck several matches. A brief search showed them where the man had crouched. There was blood on the ground.

"You wounded him," Lea said.

"Figured I must have," Ellison said, getting to his feet. "Otherwise he wouldn't have pulled out so fast. Let's get back to the ranch."

"I know how it looks, Drew. But it could have been somebody else. It could have been Big Sam."

Ellison caught his reins and swung up. "Unless I've got Big Sam pegged wrong, he wouldn't have brains enough to do anything on his own. Anyway, we'll find out."

WHEN they reached Broken H headquarters, Ellison reined in at the side of the house. He dismounted and stood in the shadows looking across the yard at the bunkhouse. Lea stood beside him, her face was tight with strain.

With his eyes still on the bunkhouse Ellison said quietly, "Stay here."

She put her hand on his arm as if to stop him. Then she let it fall away and stood watching him with troubled eyes as he walked across the yard.

At the bunkhouse door, Ellison hesitated. Then with his hand on his gun he opened the door and stepped quickly inside. The lamp was out, but moonlight, slanting through a window, showed him Ganes's bunk. Ganes was in it, apparently asleep.

The moonlight didn't reach as far as Big Sam's bunk, but Ellison could see that it was empty. He moved across the room, telling himself that Ganes could have been wounded only slightly, that he could have come back here easily enough.

When Ellison was close to the bunk his boot came down on a loose board. The squeaking sound was loud in the silence. Ganes rolled over and blinked his eyes.

"What's up?" he muttered.

"Don't give me that innocent stuff," Ellison said.

Ganes raised up on one elbow. "What are you talking about, and what are you doing pussyfooting around in here?"

"Lea and I went for a ride," Ellison said, watching him intently. "Somebody followed us and took a shot at me."

Ganes was scowling. "And you think it was me?"

"Could have been."

"Listen, Ellison, you're carrying your suspicions a little too far."

"Maybe I am," Ellison admitted, "but it all adds up. The old man cut you off in his will, and that could be eating on you—that and the fact that Lea can't see you as a husband. You could figure that, if you keep anybody else from getting her, one of these days she'll break down and marry you."

"I don't care how it looks. I didn't kill those men, and I didn't take a shot at you tonight."

Ellison was almost convinced he was telling the truth, but he had to be sure. "Whoever tried to kill me tonight," he said, "was leaking blood when he lit out."

Ganes smiled thinly and threw the covers back. "Well, take a look, Ellison. Do you see any blood on me?"

A glance showed Ellison that he was wrong. "Somebody was watching us before we pulled out," he said. "They were hiding beside the bunkhouse. It wasn't you, Ganes, so maybe it was Big Sam."

"Sam said he was going to town."

Ellison struck a match and lit the lamp. He said thoughtfully, "Sam could have gone a little way and then turned back."

Ganes reached for his pants and then his shirt. He was half dressed when the door opened and Lea came in. She was breathing hard and there was fear in her eyes.

"It wasn't Fred," Ellison told her.

Lea was visibly relieved.

Ganes finished pulling on his boots and

stood up, his gaze fastened on the girl. "Did you think it was me?"

"No, Fred, I was sure it wasn't."

Ganes picked up his hat and started for the door. "I'm going to town," he said. "I'll find out if Sam has been there."

Lea laid her hand on his arm when he started out. "Fred, be careful."

He nodded and, with a half-resentful glance at Ellison, left the bunkhouse.

THE lamp was smoking and Ellison turned it down before walking Lea to the door. He said, "It's late. You'd better get some sleep."

A thoughtful frown lined her forehead. "What reason could Sam have for wanting to kill you?"

"He could be working for somebody else. If it were him, he won't come back here tonight and there's no use looking for him till morning."

He walked to the house with her, said goodnight, and took the horses back to the corral. He told himself that it was still possible Fred Ganes was back of it, that he could have hired Big Sam to do the killings. But somehow Ellison had a feeling that Ganes was on the level.

He went back to the bunkhouse and turned out the lamp. With his clothes on he lay down on a bunk, but he had no intention of going to sleep. He had told Lea that if Sam were the killer he wouldn't return to the ranch. But Ellison knew it was possible the big man had only been slightly wounded, that he might come back in an attempt to avoid suspicion.

An hour dragged by. Ellison lay in the darkness mulling over what had happened, and wondering if Lea had an enemy that she didn't know about. Maybe somebody wanted her ranch and was trying to make it so rough on her that she would sell out and leave.

He was smoking his fifth cigarette when he heard a horse nicker. Instantly alert, Ellison put his smoke out, listening to the murmur of hoofs drawing nearer. He crossed to the window and in the moonlight saw Big Sam ride up to the corral. With a furtive glance, the big man unsaddled.

Ellison was stretched out on his bunk again when the door opened and Sam came into the bunkhouse. Sam closed the door and moved quietly through the darkness to his bunk.

"Got back, I see," Ellison said softly.

Sam stiffened. Then he said, "Didn't want to wake you up."

"It's all right," Ellison said, his hand on his gun. "Go ahead and light the lamp."

"I can get my duds off in the dark. No sense waking Fred up."

"Fred went off somewhere. Go ahead and light the lamp."

Sam hesitated for a moment, then crossed to the table and struck a match. Light flooded the room and Ellison gave the big man a quick survey. There was no blood in sight, but the man's shirt held Ellison's attention.

"I could have sworn you had a different shirt on when you left here," Ellison said.

"Same one," Sam said, but he was uneasy now.

Ellison sat up slowly, his gun was in his hand, pointed at Big Sam's middle.

"What's the idea, mister?" Sam growled.

"The idea," Ellison said, watching him closely, "is that you started for town and then sneaked back here. When Lea and I went for a ride, you followed us and took a shot at me."

"You're talking loco."

The gun was steady in Ellison's hand. "I winged you tonight, but you figured I wouldn't know that. So you went somewhere, got patched up, borrowed another shirt, and high-tailed it back here, hoping to make us believe that you were just getting back from town."

SWEAT made a bright shine across Sam's forehead. "I don't know what you're talking about, mister. I went to town, had a couple of drinks, and headed for home."

"I don't think so," Ellison said. "I think you were hoping to put the blame on Ganes. Come on, Sam, take that shirt off and let's have a look at you."

"I'm not even packing a gun."

"That doesn't prove anything. You could have left it in your saddlebag."

The big man still stood beside the table,

but now he moved suddenly. He swept the lamp from the table and ducked as Ellison fired. Not wanting to kill the man before he talked, Ellison tried for his arm.

The muzzle flash showed him that he had missed, and it showed him something else. Big Sam was leaping across the room toward him. Ellison tried to swing his gun to the right but, before he could pull the trigger again, Sam was on him, the weight of the big man's body forcing him back on the bunk.

With Ellison pinned there on his back, Sam sledged him in the face and Ellison felt his lips split, felt the warm spurt of blood. He saw the fist coming again and knew that if it landed the fight would be over. He rolled his head, avoiding the full force of the blow. Skin ripped on his cheek, and the fist went back again.

Ellison was still holding onto the gun. He got his arm free and lifted the weapon, using it as a club. The barrel rapped the side of Sam's head, brought a grunt out of him. Ellison hit him again and Big Sam, stunned now, twisted away. But by the time Ellison got to his feet Sam was up and after him.

They struggled across the room, their bodies locked together. Ellison was forced to let go of the gun. He heard it hit the floor, and winced as Sam's mallet-like fist drove into his stomach. The blow sent him reeling back, and he had a glimpse of Sam's dark shape dropping to the floor, knew that Sam was searching in the darkness for the gun.

Fighting off the sickness in his stomach, Ellison started toward the man and cursed softly as he bumped into a chair. He grabbed it up and went on, hearing Sam's triumphant grunt as he found the gun. Still on his knees, the big man got in one wild shot. Then Ellison brought the chair down on his head. Wood splintered and Ellison was holding nothing but the back of the chair in his hands.

Sam staggered up, the gun forgotten as he reeled toward the door. Ellison threw the back of the chair and it struck Sam between the shoulders. The big man stumbled, caught himself, and lunged toward the door. Ellison leaped forward and caught him before he could get through it. With his left fist full of Sam's shirt. Ellison hit him in the face. The blow drove Sam back against the wall.

When Ellison came in again, Sam caught him with a wild right. It was a powerful blow and it sent Ellison staggering back. He had a glimpse of Sam going out the door before he crashed into the table, upsetting it. He landed on his back, the wind knocked out of him.

After a moment he sat up and shook his head, trying to clear it. With an effort he got up, unsteady as he started for the door. He banged his shin on a leg of the table, moved around it and went on, working his way across the dark room. By the time he reached the door, hoofbeats were drumming in the yard, and he had a glimpse of Big Sam as the man raced away from the corral. He hadn't had time to saddle, Ellison thought, and knew the big man must be riding bareback.

ELLISON cursed and turned back inside. He struck a match and in the brief flare of light found his gun. When he returned to the doorway the sound of Sam's horse was fast fading in the night. He knew there was little chance of finding the man in the darkness, but he headed for the corral anyway.

"Drew!"

It was Lea calling to him. When he turned around she was coming from the house, running across the yard. He stopped and waited for her to reach him.

"Drew, what is it? I heard a noise. Oh, Drew, you've been hurt!"

Briefly he told her what had happened. When he started toward the corral, she grabbed him. "You can't find him tonight. Sam knows this range and you don't."

Ellison knew she was right, knew there was nothing he could do until morning. His mouth hurt, and there was blood on his face where Sam's knuckles had ripped the skin. Lea insisted that they go to the house so she could tend to him.

While she was washing his face, Ellison said, "Where could Sam have got a different shirt in a hurry?"

"The Wagon Wheel is the closest place, but he wouldn't have gone there."

"How do you know?"

"Why, Mr. Kemp is a highly respected man on this range. He was a good friend of my father's."

Ellison frowned thoughtfully. "Sam was carrying out somebody's order. I'd be willing to bet on it."

"But who, and what could they hope to gain?"

"That," Ellison said, "is something we'll have to find out."

She was close to him, touching the cloth gently to his face, and he saw the concern in her eyes. There was an odd feeling inside him. He wondered if love was something that came gradually or if it was something you were aware of right from the start.

"Drew, you came close to being killed tonight."

"I've come close before, but I'm still in one piece."

"Whoever is back of this, Drew, knows you're after him, and he's going to keep trying until he gets you. I don't want that to happen."

He got up and they stood close together, looking at each other. Ellison said, "We got a break tonight when Sam came back. Maybe our luck will hold." He put his hands lightly on her shoulders. "Anyway, you go to bed and get some sleep. You look like you're worn to a frazzle."

He left her in the kitchen and went out the back door. Fred Ganes was pulled up at the corral, unsaddling, by the time Ellison reached him.

"Sam wasn't in town," Ganes said. "Hadn't been there. So I guess that means Sam's our man."

"One of them," Ellison said, and explained how Sam had come back.

"Why would he do a thing like that?" Ganes asked.

"Because he figured, or somebody figured for him, that if he stayed away we'd know for sure he was the one who'd tried to kill me. He knew I hadn't recognized him, and since I only nicked him he likely thought I wouldn't know about that."

Ganes finished unsaddling and shook his head in puzzlement. Then, as if something had just occurred to him, he looked at Ellison. "I could have said I was going to town, figuring on tipping Sam off that you were wise." He paused and smiled tightly. "I guess I'm still not in the clear?"

"Sam's working with somebody," Ellison said gravely. "And I'm going to find out who it is."

NEXT morning early, Ellison rode out and returned to the place where he and Lea had gone last night. He rode warily, his hand close to his gun, as he searched the brush and every timbered ridge where somebody might be hiding, waiting to take a shot at him.

He found the small clearing where Sam had left his horse. After studying the ground, Ellison saw that the horse had only one front shoe. He rode back the way he had come, following the tracks. They led toward Broken H, but a mile this side of the ranch headquarters the rider had swung west. Ellison lost the tracks along a creek, and spent an hour riding in all directions before he picked them up again.

He knew it was possible that Sam was out of the country by now, but he told himself it was also possible the big man was hiding out somewhere, waiting for orders from whoever had hired him. Once Ellison spied a rider on a distant ridge, but whoever it was dropped from sight and Ellison did not see him again.

He rode on and came to a bluff overlooking a creek. Beyond the stream were some buildings. He studied them for a time, deciding that this must be Wagon Wheel, Allard Kemp's outfit. When he crossed the creek on his way to the ranch house, he saw that the stream was no more than a trickle.

The horse with the missing shoe had crossed the creek, but Ellison stopped looking at the ground as he rode toward the house. Cal North was in the barn doorway working on some gear. He glanced around as Ellison rode past, and then turned back to his work so that Ellison was unable to see the expression on his face.

The house was built of logs and seemed to be in good repair. Allard Kemp was just stepping onto the long front porch. He lifted his hand at sight of Ellison, and smiled his affable smile.

"I see you're still around."

Ellison nodded. "I went to work for Broken H."

Kemp was rolling a cigar between his fingers. He bit the end off and got it going. "Found out anything yet?" he asked absently.

"Not much, Ellison said. "I got back the money that Blake was carrying on him, so I know that he was killed for some other reason.

"Seems funny somebody would kill him and not take the money."

"Guess they didn't know he had the money on him." Ellison scanned the rancher's bland features. "I'm looking for a feller named Big Sam. He took a shot at me last night and high-tailed it."

"The hell you say."

"Thought maybe you might have seen something of him."

Kemp shook his head. "No, he hasn't been by here."

You're lying, Ellison thought, but he kept his face straight, giving the rancher no indication that he knew he wasn't telling the truth. Of course, Sam could have been here without Kemp's knowing about it. It was possible the big man was working with North.

Ellison glanced toward the barn and saw that North was out of sight. He said idly, "You've got a nice outfit here."

"I like it," Kemp said. "Beats any range I've ever come across."

They talked for a few minutes longer and then Ellison left, riding back the way he had come. When he crossed the creek he noticed again that there was very little water in it. He had a feeling that Kemp was staring after him, but he did not look around to see.

Beyond the creek he climbed again to the bluff and, keeping out of sight, watched the ranch buildings for a time to see if he were being followed. There was no sign of a rider and, after a while, Ellison rode on. He told himself that Sam wouldn't likely stay on the ranch, but would be hiding out somewhere not too far away. If he could find the big man and watch him without Sam's knowing it, Ellison felt sure that eventually Sam would lead him to the man he wanted.

There were tracks leading away from Wagon Wheel, but none of them made by a horse with a missing shoe. Some time during the night, Ellison told himself, Sam had taken care of that.

The sun climbed higher, showing him that it was almost noon. He had left the ranch before breakfast, without telling Lea where he was going. He knew she would be worried, and he considered returning to Broken H. But that would take time.

Find Sam, he thought, and he can give you the answer to the whole business.

He rode on, knowing that Sam might spot him first, that a bullet might come tearing into him at any minute.

AFTER a sleepless night, Lea rose and dressed and went into the kitchen. She started a fire in the big wood range, put coffee water on to boil. Her mind was troubled and she kept thinking of Ellison, telling herself that twice now he had come close to being killed. And the dread was growing in her that it was only a matter of time until they got him.

She cooked breakfast, but her mind was not on food. Desperation had driven her to seek Ellison's help. She had tempted him, drawn him into a trap, and now he would die like the others. She remembered Paul, the first man she had gone with, and how for a while she had thought she was in love with him. A girl living on a ranch got lonely, and Paul had taken her to dances and to church. He told her he loved her, wanted to marry her, but she had kept putting him off, wanting to be sure.

And then he was found one night beside the trail not a mile from the house. A man who was well-liked, who got along with everyone, shot down without reason. It was then the whispers had started, whispers that had grown into ugly talk after Jim Blake was killed.

She was frying bacon and eggs when Fred came in through the back door. He saw the question in her eyes and said, "Ellison was gone when I got up."

"To look for Sam," Lea said worriedly.

Ganes got a cup and came to the stove for the coffee pot. He said, "Maybe he's had enough and has decided to pull out."

Lea shook her head. "No, he wouldn't leave, not now."

Ganes took a sip of coffee and looked at her over the top of the cup. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

"Yes," Lea said soberly. "For the first time, I'm really in love."

"I guess I kind of resent him," Ganes said, a trace of moodiness in his eyes. "Not because you're in love with him, but because he's been able to find out more in one day than I have in six months."

Lea turned the bacon and, attempting to console him, said, "You've had your hands full with the ranch, Fred. Besides, how can you fight somebody you can't see?"

When Ganes had eaten his breakfast, he started out, then paused in the doorway. "You're worrying yourself sick," he said. When Lea didn't answer, he spoke again. "I'll take a ride and see if I can find him."

Lea sat at the table, feeling no need for food. He might be lying out there somewhere wounded, she thought—maybe dead.

Putting the thought from her mind, she got busy with her work. But as the day wore on and neither Ellison nor Ganes had returned, her uneasiness increased. By late afternoon she was convinced that something had happened to Ellison, that he wouldn't stay away this long.

The sun was going down when she went to the corral and saddled her horse. She had held off doing what she was going to do now—take Allard Kemp's offer to buy the ranch. If only she had taken him up in the first place and gone away somewhere, maybe things would have been different. But the ranch had meant a lot to her father.

Riding toward Wagon Wheel, she had a hard time fighting back the tears. It had hurt her to have people saying she was responsible for two men dying, but now she wondered if they were right. Maybe there was a curse on her, something dark and evil that brought about the deaths of those who loved her. She had refused to believe it, but now, close to the breaking point, her mind was filled with doubts.

She would sell the ranch and go away somewhere. Fred could have half the money, so he could buy a small place of his own. He would hate to give up Broken H; he had put a lot of work into it. But she needed money to take her away, so selling the ranch was the only solution.

IT WAS dark by the time she reached Wagon Wheel. A lamp was burning in the front part of the log house and, as she rode across the yard, Allard Kemp appeared on the porch, bareheaded and in his shirt sleeves.

"This is a pleasant surprise," Kemp said when he recognized her.

Lea dismounted and walked to the porch. She knew that Kemp was watching her curiously.

"I came to talk business, Allard."

"Well," Kemp said, smiling. "Let's go inside. Cal and I were just passing the time with a little penny-ante poker. Rest of the boys went to town."

Cal North was seated at a table in the large living room. He nodded to her, but did not get up. Lea gave him only a glance, then took the chair that Kemp offered her. A small fire was burning in the fireplace and Kemp walked over to it and put another stick of wood in. Turning, he brushed off his hands and said, "I had given up hope of your ever selling, Lea."

"I'm leaving," she told him. "I can't stay here any longer."

Lamplight played over Kemp's ruddy face. "I know you've been under an awful strain these past few months."

Lea was looking at the floor, her thought on Ellison. Then she gave Kemp her attention, asking, "Your offer's still open, isn't it?"

The rancher glanced at North, who was still seated at the table, idly shuffling a deck of cards.

"It's still open," Kemp said, and turned away from her. He walked to a table and opened a box of cigars. With his back to her, he said, "I'm afraid I can't go quite as high as I told you at first."

She was in no frame of mind to haggle. She said, "Give me twenty thousand and the ranch is yours."

"It's a fair price," the rancher said. "But I haven't got that much. After last winter and—"

"How much can you raise?"

Kemp pursed his lips, considering it for a

moment. "By scraping around I might get together ten thousand."

He had been their neighbor as far back as she could remember, a man with a reputation for square dealing, a man whose sincerity she had never questioned until now. Looking at his smooth face, she wondered if his smile were a surface thing, put on to help him keep hidden the ugliness in his mind.

"The ranch is worth more than that," she said heavily.

Kemp nodded. "I know it is, and I'd like to help you all I can, but ten thousand is the best I can do."

There was something unreadable in his eyes, something close to mockery. She had the feeling that down inside he was laughing at her. And yet she had made her decision. Trying to find another buyer would take time, and she couldn't stay any longer.

She said, "When can we close the deal?"

"Tomorrow morning if you like. You can meet me at the bank and we'll draw up the papers."

She did not look at Cal North, but she knew he was watching her and she had the feeling that he was laughing at her, too.

"I'll see you in the morning, then," she said, rising.

Kemp's eyes were full of simulated sympathy. "I'm sorry things have turned out the way they have, Lea. But I suppose, under the circumstances, this is the only thing you can do."

He wasn't sorry, she thought, but what did it matter? Five thousand wasn't much, but it would take her away. In some place where she wasn't known she could get a job and try to forget what was behind her.

SHE was starting across the room when a sound came from the back of the house. A moment later Big Sam stepped into the living room. At sight of her he drew up, his face loose with surprise, and stood there as though he didn't know what to do.

Cal North cursed softly. "You damned, dumb fool."

For an instant Lea stood there, the realization that Sam had been carrying out orders from Kemp turning her insides cold. She saw Kemp and North trade glances as she started moving toward the door. She moved slowly at first, and then she whirled and started to run.

"Stop her," Kemp said to North.

Lea had the door open, was halfway through it, when North grabbed her and dragged her back into the room. She struggled, trying to kick him, trying to break away, but he held on and carried her across the room to a sofa, where he threw her down.

"Better stay there," Kemp said. "Cal can get pretty rough if he wants to."

North backed up a short distance and stood rubbing his wrist, where her nails had raked it. He looked uncertainly at his boss.

Kemp was staring at Big Sam, who still stood where he had stopped. He was shuffling his feet and his mouth hung open.

"You stupid ox," Kemp said. "I told you to hide out in the hills and to stay away from here."

"I didn't figure there'd be anybody here," Sam said in a whining tone. "That bullet hole in my arm got to bothering me. I don't think Cal took care of it right last night. I think I've got an infection in it."

North said sneeringly, "Why didn't you go into town and have the doc fix it, so he could run to the sheriff?"

"I told you how it was," Sam said, still shuffling his feet. "I stayed out there in the hills last night and today, holding up like a damned coyote, and all the time my arm was getting worse. I tell you I've got to have something done for it."

"If you hadn't bungled that job last night," Kemp said, "everything would be all right. But you got jumpy and let Ellison wing you, and now you come busting in here just when I've got what I've been after."

North was scowling. "All this gabbing isn't getting us nowhere. She's wise to you, Allard, so what are you going to do about it?"

Lea looked at the rancher, thinking that it was as if he had removed a mask, showing for the first time the real Allard Kemp. She saw the hard glint of purpose in his eyes.

"We can't let her go," Kemp said.

Lea felt as if her insides were frozen. She said with forced calmness, "You couldn't get away with killing me."

Kemp's face was like stone. "You could have an accident, my dear. Your horse might fall over a cliff back on your range."

"That won't get you the ranch," North said.

"The ranch will have to wait a while," Kemp told him. "With Lea gone the outfit will go to Fred, and I'll figure out a way to force Fred into selling."

Plainly ill at ease, Big Sam said, "You'd better stop fooling around about it. Ellison's been snooping around in the hills. I spotted him a couple of times."

Kemp nodded to North, and the latter started toward Lea.

AT THAT moment the front door was flung open and Drew Ellison stood in the opening, a gun in his hand. The gun swung in a deadly arc, covering the three men in the room.

"The first one who moves," Ellison said coldly, "will get it."

Cal North swore and started to reach for his gun, even with Ellison's weapon threatening him. Then he changed his mind and stood motionless—waiting, Ellison knew, for word from his boss.

Allard Kemp had crossed to the fireplace and was about to put a stick of wood on the fire. He straightened slowly and the wood was still in his hands as he stared at Ellison.

"Came here this morning," Ellison said to Lea, without taking his eyes off the three men. "I knew Sam had been here last night, but Kemp claimed he hadn't seen him. I spent the day looking for Sam, but I couldn't find him."

Big Sam and North kept glancing at Kemp, but the rancher's eyes stayed on Ellison.

"I had you figured right," Kemp said. "I knew the first time I saw you that you'd give us trouble."

The gun in Ellison's hand continued to move back and forth, covering the three of them. He said, "You had Sam or North work me over, trying to scare me away. When that didn't work you had Sam try to kill me."

Sam's face twitched, and he held on to his left arm as if it was giving him trouble.

"You've been putting on a nice act, Kemp," Ellison said. "Friendly as could be, so nobody would suspect you. But you need water, unless I miss my guess. That creek out there is almost dry."

"Yes," Kemp admitted, "I need the water on Broken H, and I need it bad. I got to have it."

Lea was quiet, staring at the rancher.

"You knew Lea wouldn't sell," Ellison said, "so you hit on the idea of trying to scare her out. You killed two men, knowing it wouldn't take much to get Maria Salazar started, handing out a lot of crazy talk about Lea's having a curse on her. Crazy, but some folks believed it, and more of them would have fallen for it after the next man was killed."

"Got it all figured out, haven't you, mister?" Kemp said with a tight smile, his entire body tense.

Ellison nodded slowly. "One more killing and Lea wouldn't be able to stand it any longer."

"That's why I came here tonight," Lea said. "I wanted to get away, and I was going to take his offer."

Except for Sam, Ellison thought, it might have worked. He had given up his search for the big man as soon as it was dark. Returning to Wagon Wheel, he had stayed on the bluff and watched the ranch, hoping that Sam might come in. When he saw Sam ride across the yard, Ellison had lost no time following him to the house.

"You'd better get their guns," Ellison said to Lea. "There's one on the mantel there by Kemp."

The girl started toward the fireplace, but Ellison was watching North. He could see that the man had tensed, knew he was going to make a play before Lea could get his gun. But it was Kemp who moved first. While Ellison's eyes were off him, he slung the stick of wood. Ellison saw it coming, tried to duck, but the heavy, two-foot piece of pine struck him in the chest and knocked him back against the wall. He saw North's gun coming up, and knew that Kemp was reaching for the one on the mantel.

He picked it up but, before he could bring it around, Lea leaned forward and grabbed his arm.

NORTH fired and the bullet ripped into the wall beside Ellison's head. He knew he would not be able to last long enough to get the three of them. He shot at North, but he knew that Big Sam had gone into action, that it would only be seconds before lead from the big man's gun smashed into him.

But hoofs were drumming in the yard and, a moment later, Fred Ganes appeared in the doorway. His gun was in his hand. After a quick survey of the room, he turned the gun toward Big Sam.

Allard Kemp was trying to fight Lea off, but she held to him, keeping him busy while Ellison concentrated on North. Cal's second shot burned a hole through the side of Ellison's shirt. And then Ellison fired again, making sure this time, and he saw North start backing away as the heavy slug tore into him. With an effort that twisted his face, he tried to bring his gun up, but he failed.

Harsh sound filled the room, and then it was still again and the powder-smoke began to drift out the open door. Big Sam got in one wild shot before Fred Ganes downed him. Then the big man, dropped his gun, clutched his shoulder and began to howl.

Ellison crossed to the fireplace, saying, "You can turn him loose now."

Lea let go of Kemp and the rancher stood there breathing heavily.

"Been looking for you all day," Ganes said to Ellison. "Spotted you in the hills once, and then lost you. Was getting hungry, so I thought I'd stop by here and bum a meal."

Ellison explained what had happened, then added, "I'm afraid I wouldn't have made out so good if you hadn't got here when you did."

Big Sam was moaning, begging them to get him a doctor. "I'll get one," Ganes said. "And I'll bring the sheriff back, too."

Later, when Ellison and Lea were riding toward Broken H, the girl said, "It's hard to believe that Kemp would go to such lengths to get hold of a ranch."

"You never can tell what some men will do," Ellison said. "Without water, he stood to lose everything he had."

Lea looked into the darkness. "I still have the feeling that I'll never be able to live down the name he gave me."

"I think you're wrong," Ellison said. "But if you still want to go away, you could leave Fred to run the ranch. Texas is a long way from here, and I think you'd like it down there."

Their horses stopped and they sat their saddles looking at each other for a moment, so close that their knees were touching. Then Ellison reached for her. She came into his arms and he held her, knowing that the trail back to the Brazos would not be a long one, for this time he would have someone to travel it with him.

Coming up in the next issue

MY GUN IS THE LAW

No jail could hold the Holbrook gang, no trial could convict them . . . there was only one way Maury Chance could fight back

A Magazine-Length Novel

By ELMER KELTON

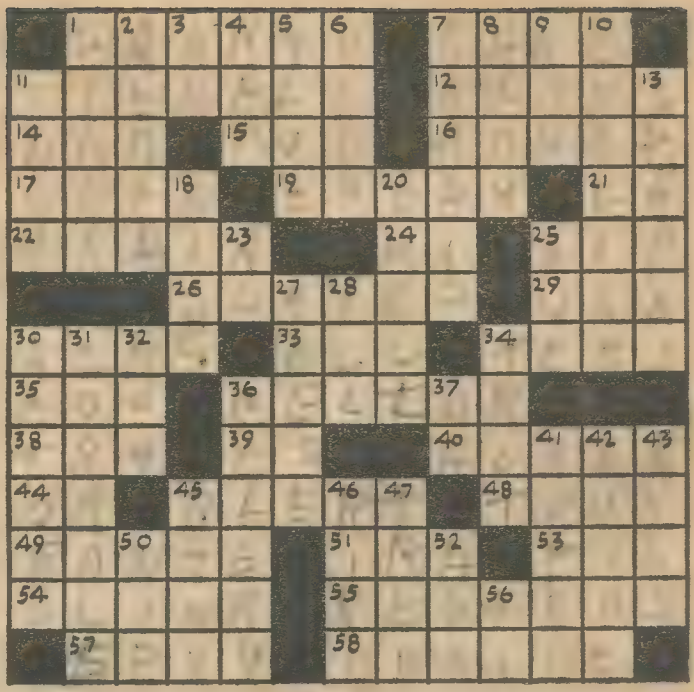
SPANISH DAGGER

Fey hated the Yankees and everything they stood for . . . but she couldn't make herself hate Will Forester enough to betray him

An Exciting Novelette

By JEANNE WILLIAMS

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Cowboy
7 Western shrubby plant
11 Spotted, as a horse
12 Identical pair
14 Girl's name
15 Undeveloped flower
16 Western cattle farm
17 Collections
19 Written composition
21 Sixth musical note
22 Locomotive and cars
24 Of me
25 To soak up
26 Motherless calves
29 To utilize
30 Land measure
33 Building wing
34 Golf mounds
35 Dove's sound
36 Underground room
38 To attempt
39 Plural ending
40 Cowboy's companion
44 Either
45 Wide-awake
48 Small city
49 "Home on the ——"
51 Man's name
53 Seed container
54 More sly
55 Western squatters
57 Sprightly
58 To wish

DOWN

1 Broader
2 Lariat (Sp.)
3 About (abbr.)
4 To seize
5 To cause to stick fast
6 Excess of chances
7 Wandering cattle
8 Absent
9 Alcoholic liquor
10 To insert in an envelope
11 Gone by
13 Forms
18 Outer portion
20 Scent
23 Negative reply
25 To take legal action
27 Farmyard birds
28 Not well
30 Stage players
31 Cattle enclosures
32 Mr. Rogers, cowboy
34 Horse's gait
36 Salad ingredient
37 Sigh of relief
41 Lassoer
42 Cursed
43 Finishes
45 That which ages
46 Orange peel
47 Forest plant
50 To pinch
52 Donkey
56 Titanium (abbr.)

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

Clell knelt to fire . . . . as the howling Comanches kept coming

The Fight

MASTERSON'S choice was clear. He could kill Crazy Heart, and stay alive . . . or he could die, and save the woman he loved . . .

FROM the first this guide business had smelled of trouble to Clell Masterson, whose senses were still sharp if his judgment had not been. His eyes swept the dazzle of brass-bright distance and found nothing but tangled mesquite and broken buttes, but the feeling of uneasiness persisted. He'd had it since the cavalry escort turned back at Red River.

Twisting in the saddle to glance around, he felt a twinge of pain stab through his left shoulder. But the wound had mended well, the post surgeon gruffly assuring him that he carried Comanche lead as good as any hunter. Waiting now on the trail for the Tatums, Clell let himself grow slack, his long legs dangling free of the stirrups.

"We'll noon here," he said when the Reverend Enoch Tatum drove up in the wagon. Janet Tatum was on the seat beside him, and Raidler followed on horseback. "Make water by dark."

Tatum frowned in a dissenting way that said it was early yet, but headed the bay team for the nearest sparse shade. It came to Clell as the wagon turned off that Miss Tatum, slim and fair-skinned as she was, seemed to take the heat better than the two men.

He found himself wondering again why he had agreed at Fort Sill to steer them through—this sky pilot and his sister, come down from Kansas to plant a church in the hell hole called Fort Griffin.

But Tatum had talked hard. He'd pay well, he was in a hurry, and hadn't Masterson said he was on his way to Griffin anyway? So Masterson had consented like a fool.

And there was Raidler, thick and dark, the marks of running from something printed like tracks across his quarrelsome eyes. Clell would have left him behind, except that Raidler looked tough and competent. He might be needed. But now Clell knew he had made a mistake. Raidler was a trouble-maker. He pestered Miss Tatum with his attentions, and he had failed to shoulder his share of camp duties.

Clell saw Raidler slip from his horse and stand beside the wheel on Miss Tatum's side. Grinning and bold, Raidler offered her his hand. She hesitated and then accepted, but once alighted she quickly withdrew her hand. Raidler looked amused.

They stood a while in the blessed shade, all but Tatum grateful for the halt. Raidler twisted up a brown cigarette, his bright stare on the

at Crockett's

By FRED GROVE

girl. Tatum began searching for firewood.

Clell's toneless voice stopped him. "Better no fire."

Enoch Tatum's square jaw firmed and a trace of irritation clouded his smooth face. "Aren't you being too cautious? We've sighted no Indians."

He was an impatient man, with an expression of resolve and zealous intensity mirrored in his direct blue eyes. He was the uncompromising New England conscience reaching out to the godless frontier.

"I know," Clell answered wearily, "that it looks quiet. But smoke'd be like advertising the Fourth of July to an Indian."

Suddenly he had a notion to tell Tatum what he had kept to himself. Crazy Heart, the Comanche chief, in to draw his government rations, had observed their departure from Fort Sill. And Comanches didn't forget. They remembered that Pease River fight as well as Clell did.

But he put it from his mind and said, "Wish you'd carry a gun, just in case. Comanches and Kiowas range through here for horses and scalps."

Tatum gave him a look of complete unconcern. "The Indians we saw at the fort acted peaceably enough."

THE man, reasoned Clell, was either absolutely fearless or the rankest fool. Carefully picking his words, he said, "Sure—there, with the troops around. Look, I'm being paid to see you through. I know only one way to do it—stay ready. If trouble comes, everybody fights. I still say you'd better get acquainted with a gun."

For a moment Tatum measured him, critically, and Clell sensed how he must appear to the Tatums, who had never experienced violence: rawboned, long-haired, packing a Bowie knife and single-action Colt, a Spencer carbine sheathed in its saddle boot.

"You are a hard, practical man, Brother Masterson." Tatum sighed and dismissed the subject. "How far is it to Fort Griffin?"

"Two days. We'll reach Crockett's Wells stage station tomorrow. Maybe you'll all want to rest up there—or at Loving's ranch farther down the trail."

Tatum shook his head vigorously. "I see no necessity for it. My mission is to establish a church without delay. I understand there is much work to be done at Fort Griffin. My people say it's a wild place, a Babylon of the plains."

Raidler flipped his cigarette away, his laugh rolling out. "So it is, Parson."

Tatum looked pleased. He said, "'And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth,'" and gazed gently at his sister. "All the more reason why we should go. Isn't that right, sister?" A heavy sigh escaped him. "However, I cannot speak with grace of this Texas land, burned over like Sodom and Gomorrah."

As Miss Tatum lifted her face, Clell felt, as always when he looked at her, a stir of interest. She was, he thought, not a pretty young woman at first glance, though she looked slender and well formed in her high-necked dress, made of some loose-fitting gray material.

He guessed it was her face he liked. It was plain but finely molded, the cheekbones high as an Indian's against the mass of bright yellow hair, a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her small nose. Her eyes were fine and wide set, blue like her brother's but without his burning purpose. Clell thought maybe he had discovered in her the picture of the woman he had always hoped to find and never had till now.

He'd been unconsciously admiring her, and now he realized that he was staring. She sensed it, turning her glance on him before he could look away. She had caught him gawking, and it nettled him that he should feel awkward and stiff. He whipped his attention aside, only to meet Raidler's stare.

She was saying, "Of course, Enoch. But I don't mind the trip. The country is open and fresh, and the wind is cool of an evening."

Her brother smiled with satisfied pride.

Clell rationed water to the horses from the wooden barrels hanging from each flank of the wagon. Afterward the travelers ate in silence, and soon they turned out upon the trail running southwest. The heat wrapped them in at once, close and oppressive, a vast

blanket whose distant folds shimmered and danced in the glittering light.

There seemed no end to the heat of the day, and Clell sighed his relief when he found the seep spring just before light faded, in a tangle of runted cedars along the base of a sandstone crest. He dismounted and stood slackly for some moments. While the gelding drank, he turned his eye on the sandy ground bordering the shallow pool.

SUDDENLY he became quite still, wondering why he hadn't noticed it sooner, before he got down. Milled horse tracks made a cluttered pattern. They drew him quickly across and he hunkered down, excitement piling high in his chest. These were

sharp impressions, only a few hours old—the marks of ponies shod with rawhide.

"They're ahead of us," he said under his breath. Rising then, he climbed to the saddle and rode out to meet the wagon, his memory bluntly reminding him that only Comanches and Kiowas used green cow or buffalo hide for war pony shoes.

They watered the horses and made cold camp well back from the spring, in an open place where a man could watch all sides, although Clell had to explain about the tracks before Tatum agreed. The first night watch was Raidler's, who grumbled about it as usual. Tatum's and Clell's turns followed.

The unease mounted in Clell. It sent him, in the late evening, on a restless circling of the camp on horseback. When he came to the spring, night lay cool over the wild land, and a silver moon rode bright as a signal in the pale sky. He was down by the spring, taking a drink, braced on hands and knees, when he caught a faint sound behind him. He jerked up, drawing his pistol and swinging it level in the same wheeling motion. Immediately, then, he felt foolish.

Janet Tatum stood before him.

He said gruffly, "You're too far from camp," and awkwardly holstered the Colt.

"I believe you'd have shot me in another moment."

"It was mighty close," he said, relaxing. "That yellow hair was all that saved you." Then, soberly, "Except that a Comanche would never get caught like that. He'd have had me. I was careless."

The filmy light enveloped her face in a kind of haze, and deepened the mystery of her eyes. Her yellow hair glowed. "It seems," she said, unafraid, "almost like daylight."

Clell thought regretfully that he had spoken no more than a dozen words to her since the trip began. "Settlers call it a Comanche moon—time to bolt the door and sleep by your rifle."

There was an immovable calmness in her. "It'll change. People will come. It won't be this way always."

A restlessness touched him. For no reason at all he had heard himself saying, "Guess not. There's fine grass, if a man can take his eyes off Comanche sign long enough to see it. And water, if you know where to look. Every time I ride through here, I think of a ranch and what a man could do—"

He did not finish, aware that he was speaking of things he had never put into words before. They were thoughts which must have been sleeping in his mind until she stirred them.

"You will have it some day."

Her eyes were straight on him, as if she saw in him something he had never known he possessed. An unexpected exhilaration flashed over him. She had a way of sizing up a man that made her unlike any woman he had ever met before.

"A lonesome life," Clell murmured, "but a good one."

"You will never be lonesome."

Clell saw the soft line of her mouth, the shadow of something there, and suddenly he had a moment of unreasonable hope. But her tone was so matter-of-fact, so calmly certain, that he could take it no other way. It was her honesty, nothing more. Why, he thought swiftly, she'd wish any person well and mean it. It made him humble, and he thought of the uncertain road to Crockett's.

He said, "Enoch will be wondering about you," and took her arm.

THEY moved without speaking, the humming night sounds keenly distinct and the tangy smells of far-off places sharp on the rising wind. A momentary contentment slid over Clell. Coyotes sang in a high-wailing chorus on a distant ridge; hobbled horses snuffled beyond the wagon.

The feeling left Clell when they reached the camp's edge and she went on. But he saw her half turn, her face softly thoughtful, before she continued on to the wagon.

Some moments later, as Clell finished hobbling his horse, he saw Raidler walking toward him with a jerky, angry gait. When he halted close to Clell he said in a low, scornful tone, "You ride out to play Indian scout, and come in with her."

Clell was startled. "What're you trying to say?"

"Just said it." Raidler drew erect. He loomed broad and hard-muscled, a surly man bitten now by jealousy and suspicion. His temper raged out. "You're always the big boss—laying down the law in camp . . . so all-fired careful about Comanches. Then you sneak out to meet a woman in the cedars!"

Clell listened, a hot anger leaping in him. He said coldly, "You're crazy."

Raidler's face took on an odd, secretive expression. "Am I, Straight Knife?"

The next moment was swift and violent. Raidler ploughed in, a stored-up desire shining like polished metal in his eyes. Before Clell could shift, the man's knuckles pounded his chest, ripped his chin. Clell tasted salty blood. He swayed aside, his head ringing. Raidler closed in—powerful, hating, too eager. He threw a roundhouse swing and missed, then landed a glancing blow on Clell's game shoulder that sent pain flooding through his entire body.

But Clell had ceased backing. His boots were firmly planted on the ground now. When Raidler punched again, Clell ducked in and under. He saw Raidler's unguarded jaw and smashed his fist against it. Raidler went to his knees, and Clell could hear his soggy breathing.

The bigger man staggered up, still dangerous, for there was perverseness in him that had to spend itself. He lowered his head and butted it hard into Clell's belly. For one stricken interval Clell's wind was gone. He saw nothing but light-shattered blackness, felt nothing but a racking weakness.

Then somehow he got his hands around the thick body and threw it from him, and thereby gained time. So when Raidler tore in, swinging wildly, Clell was ready. He measured him this time, grimly, with a sort of savage joy. His fist struck with all his power behind it. Raidler took one loose-jointed backward step and fell to the ground. He did not get up.

Clell stood over him with hacking breath. He said between his teeth, "Get up. You're not through." He said it furiously, hoping Raidler would rise so he could smash him down again.

Raidler stirred. His eyes were open, yet he seemed not to see Clell. So Clell left him there. Going heavy-footed to the spring, he felt a faint bafflement as his mind wandered back to the name Raidler had spat out—Straight Knife. Only the Comanches called him that.

But just now he was too sore to ponder about it long. He washed up and trailed back, glad that the fight had been some distance from the wagon, that she had not seen it. He knew by now that she hated violence, and he had wanted to smash Raidler's face in. He smoked and waited, apart from the others, and was surprised at his relief when Raidler presently dragged in. He passed Clell without a word, and stood his watch in silence until Tatum took over.

LATER, when Tatum touched him, Clell rose to finish out the night. As the sky slowly changed Clell, thinking of what might be between them and Crockett's, grew increasingly uneasy.

The sensation dogged him when he started them off in the early unreal light, in the false coolness. At breakfast Janet Tatum had noticed Raidler's swollen jaw, and Clell, seeing her attention briefly on his own skinned knuckles, knew that she had the story. Some-

how it gave him no elation, even though Raidler deserved the beating.

Soon a hot sun blazed down cruelly. Burning wind whipped waves of red dust across the glassy, brittle brightness. Yet, Clell thought, this emptiness called to a man, made you dream big things, maybe bigger than you were capable of. It raked up impossible hopes of a young woman with yellow hair and a fair face. He forced the thought from his mind.

Toward mid-morning the country grew more rough, and it looked good to Clell. Crockett's lay ahead on the trail, in a belt of low rocky hills laced with cedar. An hour later Clell caught smoke smell. Dropping down upon the flats some minutes afterward, he took one look and his heart turned cold.

Crockett's was a blackened patch of still-smoldering logs, marked by the stone chimney that stood like a monument for the two shapes lying where the stage station had been. A third figure lay between the site of the cabin and the empty stone corral, which was the only thing left standing.

With a sudden sense of outrage, Clell ran the gelding up close. Scorched, acrid smells filled his nostrils. A glance told him that he was too late. At that a cool caution took hold, and he searched the clearing. Nothing moved, nothing that he could see. He did not like the shielding timber across the flatness.

The wagon rattled up. Enoch Tatum was staring, his face graven with horror, with protest. He made as if to descend by passing the reins to his sister. Her face was drawn, her knotted hands white with tension.

"Don't get down," Clell told Tatum.

"But these people!"

"Nothing we can do now." Clell drove the harsh words intentionally at Tatum, and realized how cruel he sounded. But warning signals were racing like wind along his veins. "This just happened, maybe an hour ago."

It broke without the faintest warning. One instant Clell saw Enoch Tatum's righteous face turn stubborn and unyielding. The next moment a high-pitched whoop shocked the stillness. Ponies jumped from the shaggy hills across the clearing. Clell stared, fighting a trapped feeling. The quick certainty hit him that it was already too late to run. Then he was shouting and pointing toward the stone corral.

He never quite knew how Tatum got the wagon turned in time and the bay team strung out running. Clell was too busy firing at the naked, howling shapes, conscious of Raidler flanking him as they ran their horses after the wagon.

Tatum had whipped the team inside, and Clell felt a tug of relief. But even as he left the saddle and knelt at the entrance to slide the Spencer's barrel around the stone post, the Comanches kept coming. He squeezed off his careful shots, knowing that Raidler crouched coolly across from him. Now the Comanches, screaming defiantly, veered off and drummed out of range. Three riderless ponies were left behind.

DRY-MOUTHED, Clell stood up, aware of the acrid dirty-gray powdersmoke. He realized there wasn't much they could do except back the wagon into the gateway to block it, then unhitch and wait. So he called to Raidler and Tatum and it was done.

As they finished, Raidler murmured, "You think of everything."

Clell let it pass, remembering how well Raidler had fought, and that violence alone would never handle the man.

"Thank God for our refuge," Tatum broke in fervently, eyes on his sister.

Clell said, "Crockett knew Comanches. He built this, even portholed the wall. Guess he got careless."

Silently they all watched the distant milling of the Comanches. Tatum's voice finally broke the silence. "Some of them continue to ride about. Perhaps they will leave."

"Reckon not," Clell answered wearily. "An Indian's great on palaver. They'll pow-wow a while, chew it over, and try again." His gaze went to Janet Tatum, and his helplessness struck him like a physical blow.

"If you ask me," Raidler said, "there's more to this than meets the eye. I heard a story at the sutler's, back at Fort Sill. They said a white man the Comanches call Straight

Knife killed a chief named Big Bull on the Pease River. The Indians swore revenge. Now we come in here and find them waiting, the trap set. Why? Why'd they hang around? They wiped out the stage station, took scalps and horses. They've been waiting for somebody special, I'd say. They want you, Masterson. You're Straight Knife! Are we all going to die because of you?"

It was so unexpected that Clell could only listen in stunned disbelief. Heat burned his face. Yet, as he met the accusing stare, there was a change inside him. His anger faded, just his intense dislike for Raidler sticking. In one way he was to blame; in another he wasn't. Well, he guessed it didn't matter much, the fix they were in.

He said in a dead tone, "That all they told you?"

He had the impulse to tell them about the running fight on the plains—how he had found his two buffalo skinners, how—and he would never understand why his luck held—he had finally eluded the warriors and reached Fort Sill, more dead than alive. But he said nothing. He'd sound like a man crying.

Tatum said firmly, "We shall not quarrel among ourselves." But Clell caught the trace of blame, try as Tatum did to hide it. His sister did not speak. Her expression was hard to define.

Sound pulled Clell to the wall. He said, "They're coming."

His throat tightened as the Comanches pounded toward them, their high, thin whoops shrill on the wind. He thought they intended to charge the corral, regardless of loss, although reason told him that was not an Indian's fighting style. Then, barely beyond rifle range, they stopped in a cloud of dust. An Indian astride a white horse rode out. Recognition came to Clell as the distance narrowed, and with it a curious wonder. The Comanche rode with both hands clasped in front of his body, his rifle holstered. He halted.

All at once Raidler flung up his carbine. Clell batted it down.

Raidler muttered angrily, "Friend of yours?"

"Not exactly. Hold your fire. Crazy Heart's making the peace sign. He wants to talk. He knows he can take us, but he's not eager to pay the price. Maybe we can stall him."

Clell was not conscious of movement, yet he found himself striding to his horse, jamming the carbine into the boot.

"Where are you going?" Tatum was incredulous, his eyes big.

"Aim to talk," said Clell.

He squeezed the gelding between the wagon and the stone post, drawing in his breath as he rode into the open, slowly approaching the Comanche. A tingling feeling moved along his spine while he made the peace sign.

"Crazy Heart," Clell said, raising his right hand. In a mixture of Comanche and Spanish he continued, "Great chief. Very brave. Great stealer of horses."

CRAZY HEART faced him, a heavy, broad-chested Indian with proud, scowling eyes and a stern mouth fixed in lines of contempt for all white men.

His scowl deepened. "You kill three warriors."

"Comanches kill three whites." Better not buckle under, Clell thought, else he'll judge it a weakness. "We're even."

"Not long ago you killed Big Bull. Now Comanches kill Straight Knife!" The Indian jumped his pony forward and swept his muscular arm in a harsh cutting motion.

Clell blinked, feeling pressure knot his insides. "Straight Knife is not afraid," he replied scornfully. "Neither are my people. We have our own medicine man, a man who speaks the Great Spirit's words." Say anything, his mind prompted, that will puzzle him. "It will cost many warriors to take our fort. We are not afraid. Look! Four of us travel in your country without pony soldiers." Some instinct had caused him to lift his voice so the warriors behind Crazy Heart could hear.

If there were any expression on the coppery face, Clell decided, it was one of shrewd thoughtfulness. A war party leader's prestige not only depended on scalps and booty, but on the number of casualties. A chief who

lost many warriors soon rode alone. Crazy Heart had won scalps and loot, but he also had lost three men. Could he afford to lose more?"

"Straight Knife will die," the Comanche persisted, unswayed.

Clell's hopes fell. They wanted him bad, all right—enough to risk the loss. On the other hand, why had Crazy Heart asked to palaver? It dawned on him gradually, a beginning glimmer, far off, like distant pinpoints of light in darkness. He saw it suddenly and clearly.

Without his really thinking about them the

"My shot gun? What for?"

words came out. "Straight Knife will never surrender. But he will fight *you*, Crazy Heart —only you, the greatest Comanche—out here in the open. But first you must let my people travel along this road. They must not be killed."

The stony countenance did not change, and Clell knew a black despair. He threw all the scorn he could muster into his voice, and spoke loudly, for all the warriors to hear.

"Does Crazy Heart speak for the war party? Maybe he talks only for the young men without war honors. Maybe—" Clell went on apprehensively—"he has the heart of a woman."

"Crazy Heart speaks for all Comanches!" The Indian's sweeping gesture took in earth and sky. His pride was cut. "We fight! Tell your people to go on the road."

"They will not be touched?" asked Clell, thinking of the others.

"You have my word, white man," came the withering reply.

Clell weighed it. Crazy Heart had a reputation at the post for keeping his word. He made war, but he had never promised peace and broken it. "That settles it," he said. "Knives or guns?"

Crazy Heart's answer was to slap his belt knife. Clell nodded, soberly considering the Indian's heavy, powerful torso.

Riding back, Clell told himself there was no other way. He could trust Crazy Heart. But the wild young men? Could Crazy Heart restrain them afterward, if—Clell tried not to think of that as he entered the corral. He explained briefly, making it sound workable, and saw the stunned shock of the Tatums, the uncertainty of Raidler.

Tatum protested at once. "You can't sacrifice yourself. We won't let you." His jaw hardened.

"Pease River was worse," countered Clell with a confidence he did not feel. "Now, listen. Once you get in the hills, unhitch and ride the team. Leave the wagon. Ride hard. Loving's ranch is ten-fifteen miles due west. You'll make it."

"It's a chance," put in Raidler, not sure. He kept looking at Clell. "But can we trust an Indian?"

"We have to trust somebody," Clell told him, unbuckling his gunbelt and holding it out to Tatum.

"No," said Tatum with a flare of anger, "I won't take it." He stepped back, and Clell pitched the belt to Raidler.

JANET TATUM swung on her brother. "Enoch, this is wrong. We can't leave." There was a look on her face Clell had never seen there before.

"Except we can't win here," Clell said roughly. He turned on his heel with the thought, I could give them my horse, which they will need; but then they'd know for sure. Haste hurried him. He called to Raidler and when Raidler stepped across, Clell read a kind of acceptance. Together they hitched the team and turned the wagon.

Finished, Clell found the Tatums still holding back. He said, "Come on."

But Janet Tatum's eyes glinted a growing defiance, and Tatum shuffled indecisively, the struggle plainly upon him.

"You owe it to her," Clell said. "Think of it that way."

Tatum's square shoulders rose and fell. "Hurry, man!"

Change came over Tatum's face, his unwillingness giving way to reluctance as his glance hung helplessly on Janet. "All right," he said finally, head tipped down as if hiding his shame. "Come, sister." He started off slowly toward the wagon.

She did not follow. She stood rooted, hands clenching and unclenching until the knuckles grew white with strain. She defied Enoch, she defied them all. Clell understood what he would have to do.

So he crossed to her, hesitated an instant, then lifted her in his arms. Her lightness surprised him. Just the feel of her shocked him. For a few steps she lay without moving. Then she was futilely kicking and struggling against him, and when he loaded her onto the seat beside Tatum, who was already up and holding the reins, she began crying softly. It turned him trembling inside.

He managed to find his voice. "Drive slowly. Don't let on you're scared. Nothing an Indian admires like bravery." He added thinly, "I told 'em you were a big medicine man. You can't act scared."

Raidler had mounted and Clell stepped away from the wagon, held by a thought. He put the carbine in the wagon, along with a saddlebag loaded with shells. "Remember what I said. Unhitch and ride." A thickness like cotton rose in his throat. "Start 'em, Enoch."

Raidler swallowed, grunting, "By God, Masterson—" and spurred his horse, almost reluctantly.

Enoch Tatum spoke a flat "Giddap." The wagon jerked, creaking on dry axles.

Clell scarcely remembered leaving the corral. He found his attention split between the wagon, with Tatum deliberately walking the team, and the restless Comanches. This was the moment Clell feared most, when the wagon started across the flats. It could be an invitation to violence.

Then two braves, waving lances, edged their ponies forward. Fear filled Clell, followed by a great surge of relief when Crazy Heart curtly waved the men back. There was no more trouble after that.

Tatum kept the team in a steady walk. As the trail bent sharply to climb the first rise, Janet Tatum looked back. Her gaze seemed to reach across the distance to Clell; it stayed upon him until the trail twisted again and the wagon entered the cedar stand. It occurred to him that a man met a woman like her just once, that some men never did.

Then he was riding toward Crazy Heart, who had stripped to the waist. The other Comanches, dismounted in a half circle, made Clell think of haunched wolves. When he stepped from the saddle, a Comanche tore the reins from his hand. He did not protest.

Crazy Heart gripped his knife and Clell, drawing his own, spoke loudly. "After I kill you—which I will—will your warriors ride after my people?"

"You talk brave, Straight Knife, but you are the one who will die." Clell saw shrewd contempt in the dark features. "Better for your people if you do. A chief's word dies with him."

Clell understood. If he killed Crazy Heart, the warriors would finish him quickly and go after the wagon. So long as Crazy Heart lived, the Tatums and Raidler would not be touched. It was that simple.

For a while they circled, both cautious. Clell sized up the heavy, muscular body, which shone like greased copper. The ring tightened. Crazy Heart lunged in. Clell danced away, catching the flashing arc of the knife. As the Comanche drove at him again, Clell resumed the circling. Scornful, hooting cries came from the watchers. Crazy Heart's contempt grew. So did his confidence, as if he suspected Clell's stalling game.

CRAZY HEART advanced boldly, with an animal eagerness. The Comanches cried encouragement. By sheer strength he clamped on Clell's knife hand, at the same time striking. Closing in suddenly, Clell caught his wrist and stayed the blow. Straining, blood pounding, he forced the knife

slowly upward. Meanwhile Crazy Heart had immobilized Clell's weapon arm.

With alarm, Clell felt the thick wrist sliding from his grasp. He tried to break his right arm free and could not. He gave a heave. It was futile. The man's strength was unbelievable. Clell tried again, twisting violently. The Comanche's grip broke, but his other hand was swinging the knife and Clell felt a tearing pain along his shoulder.

Hot, murderous rage seized him. Wheeling recklessly, he glimpsed Crazy Heart's unprotected chest. Still, at the final instant left him, he caught himself hesitating. Too late he saw the Comanche leap back, a faint bewilderment clouding the savage eyes. The taunting cries became a steady chorus.

After that there was the weary circling. Clell's left hand was full of blood from the slashed shoulder, but he could use his arm.

Crazy Heart was eager to finish. Clell countered doggedly, wearily. Suddenly he knew his strength was leaving him. Then, shuddering legs braced wide, he noticed the gelding. An Indian, intent eyes on the struggle, held the reins loosely.

Without quite knowing why, Clell edged and worked that way, until he was almost beside the gelding. When Clell stopped, Crazy Heart came rushing. Clell pivoted at once and thrust the knife with the last of his ebbing power. Crazy Heart's head snapped back. He fell with a look of stunned surprise, sprawling among the bunched Comanches, scattering them.

The reins were in Clell's hand now, though he never remembered snatching them up. A frantic haste drove him to the saddle. Kicking flanks, he pounded through the confusion and the startled shouting. A feeling of unreality whispered that he was free. But shortly, racing straight for the hills, he heard a coming-on clatter behind him.

Something slender and blurred brushed past his ear. He ducked lower, seeing the place where the finish would come—along the rocky ridge top, marked by the white canvas of the Tatums' abandoned wagon.

Puffs of gray smoke blooming to his left meant nothing at first, even when he heard the rattle of shots, for he could not believe his eyes. Then he dared a backward look.

He saw the fight end in a matter of seconds, in a tangle of toppling brown shapes and plunging ponies gone wild. The Comanches were caught in a bunch, in a crossfire.

For a moment they were determined to ride on, crying their rage. Then Clell saw several more warriors go down. The others wavered, uncertain and bewildered. No man could stand the steady fire, not even a Comanche. Finally they broke and scattered like quail.

Clell heard a shout and spotted Raidler and the Tatums among the rocks. Janet Tatum was behind the men, even now reloading a pistol and handing it forward. That, Clell saw, accounted for the constant firing. Gratefulness climbed in him as he rode across.

Enoch Tatum came up, his smooth face fixed in some violent emotion. He kept repeating hoarsely, "You made it! You made it!" as if he could not be convinced.

He looked odd and fearsome, gripping Clell's carbine and with Clell's heavy gunbelt buckled on tight. For the first time he seemed fully aware of what had happened. He stared with revulsion toward the flattened shapes downslope.

"I take no pride whatever in that," he said regretfully, his voice hollowed, "but I am thankful for all of us."

Nobody spoke for a time. Below, on the dusty flats, the remaining Comanches had gathered. They seemed to be moving away.

Raidler cleared his throat noisily. "These folks—" He was struggling to say something and finding it hard. "Well—they wouldn't leave. They wanted to go down there. Then you got loose."

"You didn't have to stay," Janet Tatum gently reminded him.

Raidler had no answer. He looked awkward and unsure, which was unusual for him. Suddenly he left them to join Enoch Tatum.

"It won't be this way always," Janet said.

"No," Clell heard himself saying. "It sure won't." The look on her face made him remember his dreams again.

DECISION

AT GUN POINT

by JANE L. BRANCH

LIFE WITH CONNIE would never be dull, Owen knew, but he didn't count on her changing her mind right in the middle of a crisis

OWEN DUNN stepped from the restaurant after a late breakfast, and stood for a little while watching the light traffic move along Pine's dusty main street. He rolled a cigarette slowly, a tall, slender young man in his early twenties, with a lean brown face that hardened momentarily when he saw Imer's buckboard parked out front of the mercantile.

He struck a match and dipped the cigarette into the tiny flame, then flipped the match away, smoke curling from his nostrils. Then he turned and walked along the street, as Dan Imer came from the store lugging a box of supplies, which he placed in the bed of the wagon. He

took off his battered hat and used it to fan his face, his bald head shining in the bright morning sunlight.

Owen came up and said dryly, "Pretty early in the day to be raising a sweat."

Imer put his hat back on and looked around with a cheerful grin. He was a pudgy, red-faced man of fifty, with an enormous sandy mustache and twinkling blue eyes.

"I can raise one just sitting in my rocker," he said, and looked Owen up and down. "You're dressed like a man that's either going to a wedding or to his own funeral."

Owen grinned faintly as he looked down at his black suit. He touched the holstered .45 Colt strapped beneath his coat and then tapped the deputy sheriff's badge pinned to his vest, saying, "If it weren't for this and this you'd be right."

Imer mopped his sweaty face and nodded his head in the direction of the jail. "You boys taking Ed Vane to the railhead today?"

"And then some," Owen said. "Graham and I are keeping him company all the way to Yuma."

"Long trip," Imer said. "Then you'll be stopping by the station."

Owen nodded. He said casually, "Connie come in with you?"

"She's inside looking at some dress goods. Owen, you go easy with her. You know how she feels about your job."

"I ought to."

"You can't blame her, Owen."

"Maybe not," Owen said. "But there's more to it than what she lets herself look at."

HE ENTERED the cool interior of the store and saw her at once at a side counter, fingering bolts of calico. Two years ago her father, Jim Imer, then county sheriff in this corner of the Territory, had been killed while taking an outlaw into custody. Since that time she had lived with her uncle, who ran the stage relay station below Boulder Grade.

Owen came up to her, remembering their last quarrel, that had ended with nothing settled between them. He indicated a bolt of yardage that had a greenish flowered pattern and murmured, "That'd look nice on you."

She turned her head and regarded him for a silent moment, and then she smiled. "I thought so, too."

"I won't be able to come over tomorrow," Owen said.

She nodded. "So I heard." She was a handsome girl of twenty in a yellow dress, with blond hair tied back now with a green ribbon. Her blue eyes as she looked at him were level as a man's in her tanned face. "When will you be back?"

"About a week." He glanced around, then leaned over and kissed her mouth. "I'll miss tomorrow."

"I will, too. And it would be nice if this time you'd come back for good."

Owen sighed, knowing what she meant. "Give me time."

"Time," she said flatly. "Time you're spending wearing a badge and a gun for little more than you could earn punching cattle." She spoke without anger, repeating what she'd said many times before. "Mr. Dean will take you on at Ladder, and a house goes with the job. Or we could homestead."

She talked on, but Owen only listened with half an ear. It wasn't that she nagged, he thought, but only that she had her mind set against his wearing a badge, and dynamite couldn't budge her. But he had his own brand of stubborness that was as tough as hers.

"You're not listening," she accused.

"I heard most of it."

She laughed quietly. She had a wide, firm mouth, and strong white teeth. Taking his hand, she turned gracefully to look around the store, then drew him into an alcove. "You must be getting tired of listening to me."

"No—" he began, but she pulled his head down and kissed him. She was certainly one to change her moods, Owen thought. There was nothing tame about Connie, thank goodness.

"You look very handsome this morning," she whispered.

He pulled her closer and kissed the curve of her throat. She ran her fingers behind his ears and tugged at the lobes, while her lips moved along his cheek.

"Honey baby," he whispered hoarsely. His face burning, he straightened away from

her and took a gusty breath. "Now I'll surely miss seeing you tomorrow more than ever."

She fluffed her hair and gave him an enticing smile from the corners of her eyes. "We're missing a lot, aren't we?"

"That's for sure."

"But we don't need to, do we?"

Owen shook his head, and his eyes narrowed a little. He watched Connie move slowly from the alcove and finger the bolt of cloth with the green flowered pattern.

"If you think it will become me, I'll buy some."

"You always look nice in green."

"We could file on Willow Creek back of Jameson's place," she mused. "That's what we could do, Owen." She glanced back at him with a smile that turned his heart. "I suppose you have to help take this outlaw to Yuma today, but when you get back—" She left the rest of it for him to figure out.

"Your dad thought a lot of being a law officer," he told her quietly. "It was more to him than just a job. It was a chance to help people in trouble, and at the same time to get the bad ones out from underfoot. I feel the same way about it, Connie."

HER lips tightened and her eyes went flat. "I see I can't reach you, Owen."

"I halfway wish you could." He put an arm around her shoulder, but she drew back. "But I have to do what I feel is right for me, Connie."

She said in a low, hard voice, "Is it right for you to risk your life for piddling wages? Do you think you'll ever get a word of thanks from anyone? Dad didn't, and you know it. A cheap gunfighter killed him, and a week later he was forgotten."

"There are plenty of people who will never forget him."

"But he's dead, isn't he? And those people you talk about are alive. Oh, I've tried to think differently about it, but I can't. Every day and all day out there at the station you're on my mind. I think about what happened to Dad, and then that it could happen to you, and I can't stand it any longer."

"Someone has to keep law and order." It sounded stale the way he said it, he thought, and wished he could explain to her how he felt. This was, more or less, still frontier country, and the law was spread thin. He pulled a stubborn breath. "Did you ever stop to think how it would be to raise your kids in this country if it weren't for men like your dad?"

Tears sprang to her eyes. "If I raise my kids here they won't be yours."

He stared at her. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm leaving. I thought about it all last week and I decided that if I couldn't make you see sense I was going back East to live with my aunt."

His face stiffened. "Well, you're a big girl now, so I suppose it's your right. I wish you happiness, Connie." He nodded in that same stiff way, then wheeled out of the store.

From the seat of the buckboard Imer said, "What's wrong?"

Owen said, "Nothing at all," and walked over to the jail to spell Graham, who indicated the inner door.

"Everything's quiet," he told Owen. He got up from the desk and stretched, a stocky, mild-mannered man of forty who had been a deputy for the past ten years and would always remain a deputy. "Guess I'll go eat."

"Bill been by?" Bill Breen was the sheriff.

"Be here before we leave." Graham glanced at the wall clock. It was ten. "We still have two hours." He got his hat and went out.

Owen sighed heavily. He hung his hat and coat on the deer antlers that served as a rack, feeling suddenly tired. He and Graham and Breen had been taking turns guarding Ed Vane since they'd captured the outlaw up at Dry Gulch, and that had been ten days ago. Vane's trial had ended the previous day, and the noon stage was taking him on the first leg of his trip to Yuma and the Territorial prison, where he would spend the next twenty years of his life.

Owen went back through the office and up the inner stairs to the cells. It was cool up there, and dusky. Ed Vane, his knees crossed, one booted foot dangling, lay on his bunk smoking a cigarette.

Grinning at Owen, Vane said, "How much longer are you going to keep me waiting?"

"Be another two hours."

"Long trip to Yuma," Vane said.

He flipped the butt of his cigarette on the floor, then rose and stretched, laughing quietly, a slender man of thirty with a silky blond mustache that drooped at the corners of his mouth. His pale hair had that same silky appearance. He had a pale, narrow face that some women would consider handsome, and eyes as candid as a child's. Owen had known him for a good many years, long before Vane had turned bad and took to breaking the law. He had never thought much of Vane, but now he felt nothing but disgust for the man.

"A long trip, but we'll get you there," Owen said.

"Don't see how I can stop you," Vane said. "You see that cousin of mine around?"

"No."

"Well, that's the way it goes," Vane said. "You got any tobacco on you? I just used up my last."

Owen took out his tobacco sack. He stepped up to the bars and Vane reached his arm through suddenly and tried for the Colt at Owen's hip. Owen batted his arm down.

"That's being foolish. You didn't think you'd get away with it, did you?"

Vane laughed in that soft way of his. "Hell no. I just wanted to see you jump." Owen tossed the tobacco sack through the bars and Vane let it lay. He pulled out a sack of his own. "I got plenty." He gripped the bars and shook them, letting go with a wolfish howl. "You ever see a caged wolf, Owen? That's me—a caged wolf."

Owen shook his head disgustedly. Vane had made a fool of himself all during the trial, as though it were all a big joke being played on someone else. Vane grinned at him.

"You sure look sour this morning. Tell me something, Owen. "Did you see Esther around?"

Owen studied him carefully, wondering how much Vane suspected. Not that it made much difference, but still you could never tell what might happen.

"No," he said, and walked out. Vane's pretended howl followed him down the stairs.

Relaxed in the office chair, Owen considered the fact that twenty years at Yuma might really drive Vane crazy. He'd spent three years there already, and maybe the thought of that was making him act the way he did. Or maybe he was just smart and had something up his sleeve. It was hard to tell. That he'd worked at times with a partner was a known fact, which was the reason Breen had demanded they keep a close guard on him.

Jim Imer had brought Vane in that first time for rustling, and after he was released Jim had tried his level best to straighten him out. He had talked Roy Brock, Vane's cousin, into giving him a job, for Brock had a paying homestead in the hills beyond Dry Gulch, a small settlement where the hill people did most of their trading.

Roy was an honest if taciturn young man, who had little use for Ed Vane, one reason being that they were both interested in the same girl. But he'd finally agreed to give his cousin a job, and for a while it had looked like Vane might settle down.

Then Jim Imer was killed and Breen took over his job. It wasn't long after this when complaints of rustling reached the sheriff's office. Various ranchers reported missing cattle, small losses that irritated more than it angered them.

On top of that there came a flurry of robberies and holdups. A crossroads store was held up by two masked men; a prospector complained of being forced to hand over two pokes of dust; a ranch house was broken into while the owner was in town; three cowhands were held up and robbed of their wages on their way to town for their Saturday night spree.

NOTHING out of the ordinary to speak of, and yet again and again Ed Vane's name had popped into Owen's mind. For Vane had been spending a lot of time and money in the saloons, and it was only natural to wonder where the money was coming from.

So Owen had ridden out to see Roy Brock, who hadn't said much, but enough to give Owen the idea that he was sick of trying to help his cousin.

The girl's name was Esther Blane, but Owen didn't try to see her. She worked at what passed for a hotel in Dry Gulch, and

Owen doubted that she knew anything about Vane's doings.

That was the way things stood when, three months before, Carl Cornish had been shot and robbed of his ranch payroll on the road west of Pine.

A stray rider had come across the buggy and had found Cornish sprawled on the side of the road. Cornish, a tough oldster, was still alive, and he identified his assailant as Ed Vane. It was pretty obvious that Vane had meant to kill the old rancher, and had—luckily for him—bungled the job. Owen and Graham went looking for him, but Vane apparently had skipped the country.

Owen sighed and reached for his tobacco, then remembered that he'd given it to Vane. A hell of a note. He'd be damned if he'd go up and ask for it back. A buggy stopped out front. Roy Brock and Esther Blane got down and came to the door. Brock was a long,

The stage rolled out of Pine, leaving a stir of dust behind

lanky man with a gaunt and leathered face that looked longer than his years. He held the door open for Esther, a small, bony girl with frightened eyes and hair the color of damp wheat.

Owen got up and smiled at her, but he didn't feel much like smiling, for these two had no business coming here. "Didn't expect you in today," he said, looking at Brock.

"I thought it over and decided I had to see him and tell him," Brock said.

Owen frowned. "There's no need for it."

"There is." Brock nodded doggedly. "It doesn't set right with me, his not knowing the truth and wondering about it. It isn't that I want to devil him, but he's got the right to know how it happened."

Owen offered the girl his chair, but she refused with a slight shake of her head.

Brock said angrily, "Well, do I see him or not?"

"You just calm down," Owen told him, and then considered that maybe it was best that Brock talked to his cousin. He had a half notion Vane already knew the answer, but still it was a festering thing that would be better out in the open.

"I don't reckon you want in on this," he said to the girl, and again she shook her head.

"I didn't even want Roy to come here," she said. "I wish he'd change his mind."

"Better this way," Owen said, and led Brock up the stairs.

Ed Vane said, "Well—" in the softest way possible when he saw them. He rose from the bunk and came to the bars, his eyes mocking. "Hello, cousin Roy."

"I came to tell you something," Brock said hoarsely.

"Yeah?"

"You were on the dodge nearly three months and I never said anything. All I did, when you came to me for grub, was tell you to keep away from Esther. But you wouldn't, would you? You pushed your way around and frightened her, and you took money from me to get you out of the country, and then you didn't go. You haven't changed a bit, not since you were a kid." He broke off, breath coming hard, face strained.

"Get to the point," Owen said curtly.

"Sure," Brock said bitterly, his gaze on Vane. "You were pretty sure of yourself, telling Esther when you were going to see her, thinking you had us both buffaloed. And it isn't that I didn't think a lot about it before making up my mind, either, because I did. I warned you twice and both times you laughed, and the third time you threatened me. That made it my turn." He paused, tapped his chest. "Yeah, I told the law when you'd be by next to visit Esther, and that's how it happened they grabbed you. Now

you know, and that's all I've got to tell you."

"That's nice," Vane murmured, and Owen saw that his eyes had a slaty look to them.

OWEN nudged Brock's elbow. "Let's go," he said, and led the way downstairs. He glanced once at Esther and then turned back to Brock. "Well, I guess that settles it."

"Damn right," Brock said grimly. "He ruined it for us around this country, and I've had my fill. Esther and I are getting married this afternoon, and then we're going home to pack."

"Who's taking care of your place?"

"Gutterman is buying me out, and we're going back to Kansas and try to forget what happened."

"Well, I wish you both luck," Owen said.

Just then Ed Vane yelled from upstairs. "Hey, Cousin Roy!"

Brock frowned. "What?" he said harshly.

"Kansas won't be far enough!" Vane yelled, and gave his wolfish laugh.

Esther said quickly, "Let's go, Roy. Let's get out of here."

They went out. Owen thought that it would be like Vane to hold and nurse a grudge for twenty years. He looked toward the mercantile, but Imer's buggy was gone. A number of wagons were parked along the street now, and the boardwalks were crowded, even for a Saturday. Several men lounged opposite and kept their eyes on the jail. Vane's trial had pulled in a lot of folks, and Owen guessed a good many of them had stayed around to be on hand for the outlaw's departure.

Sheriff Breen, a stocky, square-faced man, came in and said, "Look at 'em out there. You'd think it was the Fourth of July. Everything all right?"

"Sure," Owen said, and told him about Brock and the girl. "I thought it best Brock and Vane get it settled between them."

Breen said he thought so, too. He kept watching the growing crowd. "There's a flock of hill people still in town. The fellow that worked with Vane could be any one of them."

"Could be," Owen admitted.

The three cowhands and the prospector had approached Breen during the trial, saying they were pretty certan Ed Vane had been one of the two men who robbed them at gun point. Vane had laughed at the charges; he'd had a more serious charge to worry about.

"You won't be bothered with passengers on the stage," Breen said. "There'll be just the three of you in the coach, and Clem on the box. Don't let Vane out at Imer's unless it's absolutely necessary. If you run into trouble it'll be before you hit the railroad, so watch it."

"He's not the first man we've taken to Yuma."

"I know that. But I don't trust him. He's like that slick Billy the Kid that Pat Garrett plugged at Fort Sumner last year."

Owen went out after tobacco. Now and then someone tried to get his attention to ask about Vane, but he ignored most of them. Connie was on his mind. She was through with him, and it was a bitter pill to swallow. There weren't many like Connie, and he couldn't imagine feeling about another girl the way he felt about her.

It was hot on the street, and dusty. Owen made his way back to the jail. Graham was inside talking to Breen.

The sheriff glanced at the clock and said, "Well, we might as well go up and get him ready to travel."

The stage had just braked to a stop out front when they came downstairs. Ed Vane, wearing handcuffs, grinned widely at the murmur that rose from the crowd as they stepped outside. He paused on the walk and Owen saw his gaze hit Brock and Esther Blane, who stood to one side.

Vane raised his shackled hands and called, "Happy wedding day, Cousin Roy! I'll be seeing you!"

"Stop it," Owen said.

Taking Vane's elbow, he moved him toward the stage. Graham held the door open and Vane ducked his head and stepped inside. He slid across the cracked leather cushions and leaned back in the corner with his legs stretched along the seat.

"Let's get rolling, Clem!" he shouted. "I can't wait to get where I'm going."

BREEN leaned in and spoke a parting word of caution, then closed the door and said, "All right, Clem." The stage rolled out of Pine, leaving a stir of dust behind.

The flats lasted a mile, and after that it was choppy country, a land that never stood still. It was a land of earthy colors, of brush and boulders and mesquite and gritty red soil. In the distance, appearing to float in the crystal-clear air, were the jagged mountains.

Owen gave them only a passing glance. He and Graham sat opposite Vane; they faced forward and looked out the windows. It was twelve miles to Imer's station, and there were a lot of turns in the road that climbed slowly to the top of Boulder Grade.

They were about three miles out of town when Vane swung his legs from the seat and straightened in his corner. He yawned and smiled sleepily at Owen.

"How about rolling me a smoke?"

Owen got his tobacco out and rolled a cigarette, and Vane reached out with his manacled hands and took the cigarette between Owen's fingers. He put it betwen his lips and leaned forward, as Owen struck a match. Then he sat back and inhaled deeply, grinning through the smoke.

"This is real living, Owen."

Owen ignored him. He rolled himself a cigarette and smoked quietly, his eyes scanning the side of the road. Breen had been worried, but now that seemed foolish. On the seat behind them rested a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun loaded with buckshot, and both he and Graham carried .45 Colts at their hips. It would take a good many men to overcome them and effect Vane's escape without Vane himself stopping a bullet. The more Owen thought of it, the sillier it seemed that anyone would even try.

From the corner of his eye Owen saw Vane move. The prisoner took the cigarette from his lips, dropped it on the floor, and stamped on it with a boot. Then he raised his legs to the seat again, leaned back and crossed his ankles. He took a side glance out of the window.

"Good country for a man to get lost," he remarked.

Neither Graham nor Owen answered. The broken land stretched out on either side and the stage bucked and jolted as it took the sharp, climbing turns.

Clem's shout reached them suddenly.

"Two riders up ahead! Watch it, boys!"

Owen reached back for the shotgun, and Vane laughed. "A man can always depend on his friends," he said.

"You got maybe one friend," Owen told him.

As they made another turn he could see the dusty streak of the road winding ahead of them through the brush and mesquite. He saw the riders, missed them as the stage made another turn, and then saw them again about a hundred yards ahead. He dropped to one knee, braced against the seat, the shotgun ready.

A moment later they swept past the riders. One of them waved at Clem. Owen put the shotgun back and sat down.

"*Some* friends," Graham said dryly.

Near the top of the grade, Vane asked for another cigarette. Owen rolled him one. He didn't feel right exactly; he had Connie on his mind again. The way things stood between them now, she would likely keep out of sight when they rolled into Imer's station.

He could make up with her, of course. Even if she didn't show, he could mention to Imer that he was turning in his badge, and Imer would tell her. Then, when he stopped off on his way back from Yuma, it would be peaches and cream. It was nice to think about, but even as he considered it he knew he wouldn't quit. From the moment he had first pinned on his badge, he had known that being a law officer was for him.

HE SIGHED, feeling the hot wind blowing through the half-open window. The smell of sage was strong on the air. He guessed he would get over this numb feeling, the sickening, hopeless sensation her decision to go east had roused in him. He heard Vane curse mildly, and he glanced at the prisoner.

"Dropped my cigarette," Vane said.

He had plunged his hands between the leather cushion and the side of the coach. Graham, who sat directly opposite, leaned

forward and muttered, "Move over, I'll get it."

Vane said, "I got it."

Graham, who was still leaning forward, grunted sharply and threw himself at Vane. A shot roared in the coach, and the smell of burnt power filled it. Graham said, "Oh!" and sprawled backwards, clutching his side.

Vane planted ready boots in his middle and kicked him into Owen, who had his gun half out of its holster.

Too late, too late! As Graham staggered into him and then sprawled in a heap, Vane cried sharply, "I got you dead center, Owen!"

Owen saw the gun in Vane's right hand, the left holding the barrel steady. Thin-wristed as he was, the outlaw had plenty of play in his handcuffs. He sat now in the corner of the seat, Graham and six feet between them, and Owen knew he hadn't a chance to put a bullet into Vane before the other emptied the gun in him.

"You had that friend after all," he murmured.

The coach had begun to slow down. Clem shouted, "Owen, what's going on?"

"Tell him that everything's all right, and to keep going," Vane said.

Owen studied him a moment. Vane had that long-gone look to him all right. The sharp edges of his jaws were pale, and his eyes were flat and unblinking as a snake's. He meant to come out on top, and only a bullet could stop him.

"Nothing wrong!" Owen shouted. "Keep rolling!"

Vane said softly, "Turn Graham over, take off his gunbelt, and push it toward my feet."

Owen leaned over and did as he was told. Graham was alive and conscious, but his face had a grayish cast to it, and his eyes were glazed with shock. The bullet had struck him in the side and he was bleeding badly. Owen unbuckled the shell belt, pulled it from under Graham and gave it a shove toward Vane's feet.

"Now your own—and be damn careful," Vane said.

After this he told Owen to toss the key for the handcuffs onto the seat beside him. It was a small key attached to a leather thong. He reached over for it, his eyes never leaving Owen's face, and picked it up with the fingers of his left hand.

"I've been thinking of this a long time," he said softly. "Every time you boys put these things on me I watched just how this key turned in the hole. I even practiced nights by cinching my belt around my wrists and making believe I was unlocking the cuffs."

He shifted the gun to his left hand as he talked. Holding the small key with the thumb and forefingers of his other hand, he moved it along the metal plate until it found the key hole. He turned the key. A second later his hands were free, and he took a long breath.

"I guess you feel better now," Owen said.

Owen got on his knees beside Graham, half raised him, and took off his coat. Graham's white shirt was stained red from the armpit to the waist. Owen stripped off the shirt, and was relieved to see that the wound wasn't as bad as he'd first thought. The bullet had plowed through the fleshy part of his side, not even touching the ribs. Owen tore the shirt and undershirt into strips and bound the wound as best he could. He made a pillow for Graham with the coat, then put his own coat over him. Then he sat back.

"A fine thing," he said.

The color was back in Vane's face, and he had a sly, happy look to him. "Isn't it, though? It worked out right nice, didn't it?"

OWEN could imagine just about what had happened, but he didn't say anything. He had the feeling Vane himself was ripe to tell him, and he knew for sure when Vane said, "I can see you're trying to figure it out. Here I was in that cell, not seeing a soul except you fellows and that lawyer. Kind of gets you, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't matter," Owen said.

"I guess not," Vane said, and laughed quietly.

But Owen saw he was nettled, wanting to be asked. He was feeling pretty proud of himself. His eyes danced with secretive mirth.

Then the secret came out. He had this friend, who had tossed a pebble through the bars of his cell window his first night in jail.

A man could whisper in the night in an alley, and make plans. That's what Vane and his friend had done.

Vane needed a gun, and his friend could have climbed up and handed him one, but the risk was too great because of the guard downstairs. There was bound to be a shooting, Vane said, and that would rouse the town. Besides, why risk breaking out when he wasn't sure if the jury might bring in a verdict of not guilty?

Still, a man had to have insurance. So during the night his friend had sneaked into the open barn where the stage was parked, and had planted the gun where Vane would have a chance to grab it. Easy as eating blueberry pie, Vane said, and intimated with his secretive grin that there was more to it than that.

"Where's your friend now?" Owen asked.

"He's around."

"I suppose he's along the road with a couple of horses."

"Could be."

That's about it, Owen thought. But he didn't like the way Vane was grinning at him, in that pleased and secretive manner. Vane had fooled them all, so maybe there was more to it than what had already happened. Giving it further thought, Owen realized Vane couldn't have been sure that the gun wouldn't have been found. Neither could he have been sure of a chance to grab it if it weren't found. That left one other plan Vane might have made, and fury and fright swept through Owen when he considered it.

He put the side of his face against the window and looked ahead. They were about to top the grade, and when they did he saw the road switch-backing steeply. Imer's adobe house, the barns, the sheds and the corrals appeared small from this height. Imer, Connie, and Willie Dykes, the hostler, were down there—just the three of them. Vane's friend made four.

"Is he down there?" Owen said.

"He damn well better be," Vane answered. "A man needs at least two chances when he's in the spot I was in. But the way it turned out, I only needed one."

Graham groaned and asked in a shaky voice for water. A full canteen was always kept in the coach, and Owen gave him a drink. He muttered his thanks, then closed his eyes like a man who's lost interest in what is going on.

Owen sat back and debated his chances. He thought of telling Vane he'd never get away with this, but he knew he'd be wasting his breath. In a way he couldn't blame Vane for what he'd done. Twenty years was a long time to spend in any man's jail.

The coach swayed and jolted down the grade. When they passed the last turn Clem didn't let his team go the way he usually did on this final stretch, and Owen knew the driver realized that something was wrong. Vane knew it, too, and he showed his hand.

"Hey, Clem!" he yelled. "You try anything and I'll blow Owen's head off!"

There was a short silence before Clem answered, "All right, Vane. No need to bloody up my stage more'n you have to."

VANE laughed, his wolfish laugh, a disconcerting sound filled with triumph. A minute later they rolled into Imer's yard. Willie, a gnarled little man with big hands that could gentle the meanest horse, stepped from the house and waved a greeting.

"Just sit where you are," Vane said. He wasn't grinning now, and the long-gone look was back in his eyes, which had never left Owen's face.

Owen knew the worst when he saw that Willie hadn't moved. Vane's friend had sent him outside to make Clem think everything was all right, Owen thought.

Just then a voice called hoarsely from inside the house. It sounded as though it had been waiting overly long to make that call, for it was edged with a tremor.

"Ed! How about it? You out there?"

"Yeah," Vane answered. "Clem, get down there by Willie. You too, Owen."

Owen got out and Vane followed, the shell belts with their holsetred guns, and the shotgun, under one arm.

"Get inside," he said.

They all filed into the big cool room. Vane came in last, after first taking a look up and down the road. "Like ducking for apples," he said. "How you doing, Lobo?"

"Man, I didn't think you'd ever get here," Lobo said from the window.

He was a lanky young fellow with a narrow face. Dampish-looking black hair hung straight down from under his sweat-stained hat. Owen recognized him, having seen him a few times in both Pine and Dry Gulch.

"Let's get out of here," Lobo said.

"I'm not ready," Vane told him.

"Looks like we both get our ears pinned back," Imer said. "Where's Graham?"

"In the coach," Owen said. "Vane shot him."

Connie gasped. She was sitting with her uncle on the bench by the long wooden table.

"He's all right," Owen said, "but he needs attention."

Vane said, "You and Willie can help him inside. He isn't hurt so bad that he can't crawl out and make a run for it, and I want him where I can see him."

"What the hell is this?" Lobo objected. He gestured with his rifle. "What've you got in mind?"

"I'll tell you later," Vane said. He prodded Willie with the shotgun. "Out you go."

Owen and Willie brought Graham inside and stretched him out on the table. Graham's face wheezed in and out with the effort, and his face was waxen. Imer got a bottle of whiskey from his small bar, and Connie raised Graham's head so he could drink.

She looked at Vane, her lips taut in her pale face. "His wound needs to be cleaned and bandaged properly."

Vane waved the suggestion aside. "Later. Lobo, keep 'em here. I want that stage out of sight, and the sooner the better."

"You know what you're doing?"

"Damn right I know what I'm doing," Vane said. "All right, Owen. You and Willie go now."

He stood by, the shotgun in the crook of his elbow, as Owen and Willie unhitched the teams and turned them loose in the big corral. Then he had them push the stage into the barn and close the doors. There were two saddled horses in the barn.

"Hell of a thing," Willie grumbled, glancing back at the corral. "The horses should be tended to after their run."

"When did Lobo jump you?" Owen asked.

"About a half hour ago. We was all inside when he rode up wanting a drink. Then he threw down on us."

HELL of a thing was right, Owen thought. He felt somehow to blame. If he'd used his head for something else besides thinking of Connie, he might have realized that Vane was smarter than he looked. Lobo wasn't much, though. He'd taken a lot of chances for Vane so far, and he was getting edgy.

When they got back to the house, Imer said to Owen, "What's keeping 'em here?"

Owen shrugged. "It looks to me as if they're pushing their luck."

Lobo gave Vane an uneasy look. On the table beside him lay Imer's shotgun that was usually kept behind the bar. He said finally, "We got our hands full as it is, with six of 'em to watch. The idea was to get out of here. Why are we staying?"

"I mean to talk to Cousin Roy," Vane said, grinning. He had both Owen's and Graham's shell belts looped around his waist. They sagged heavily at his narrow hips. "He's getting hitched, and he and his bride should be by this way in an hour or two."

"An hour or two?" Lobo breathed. "Man, you're crazy!"

Vane gave him a flat look. "Don't say that to me." And then, in an easier voice, "I'd do the same for you, Lobo, and you know it."

There was a short silence. Owen glanced at Connie and found her watching him. "What is he talking about?" she said.

She didn't know because she had never wanted to know what went on at the sheriff's office. Now Owen wondered how to explain. But Vane spoke before he could say anything.

"Never mind what I'm talking about," he told Connie. "You wanted to work on Graham, so go ahead. Where's the stuff you'll need?"

"Water in the kitchen and bandages in the bedroom."

"Go on, then. Lobo, stick close to her. There might be a gun in that bedroom."

"There isn't," Imer said. "That shotgun's the only weapon here. We're peaceful folks."

"I wish I could talk you out of that business with Brock," Owen said.

"You can't."

"He tried his best to help you."

"That's something else again."

"What'll it do for you except cut down your chances of getting away?"

Lobo looked back from the kitchen doorway at that, and Vane grinned at him.

"Do me a world of good to see him squirm. Dammit, do you realize he was putting me away for twenty years?" An expression of outrage crossed Vane's face. "I'd rather hang."

"Maybe you will, at that," Clem said dryly.

"Nobody asked you, grandpaw," Vane snapped. "Sit over there against the wall and be quiet. The rest of you, too."

It was certainly humiliating, Owen thought. But there wasn't a thing you could do against a man holding a double-barreled sawed-off.

WHEN Connie came in with a pan of hot water and bandages, Owen got up and went to the table. Vane looked at him but didn't say anything. Graham blinked dull eyes and asked if he could have another pull at the bottle, so Owen gave him a drink, then turned him on his side and cut away the make-do bandages with the scissors Connie handed him. Then she cleansed the wound and Owen poured whiskey on it.

As they worked together across the table, she said softly, "Is he going to kill Brock?"

"Looks that way," Owen told her.

"But why?" she demanded.

"I tried to tell you all about it the other day, and you wouldn't listen," he said roughly. She bit her lip and gave him a scalding look. "All right," Owen said, not caring now if Vane heard him. "He kept bothering Esther until Brock couldn't take it any longer. So Brock told us where to find him."

"He said something about their getting married." Owen nodded. "And they have to pass here to get to Dry Gulch." She broke off, her face shocked.

Lobo said from the side window, "Wagon coming," and Vane joined him.

"Farmers," he said. "Cousin Roy will be driving his buggy."

Connie's eyes flashed. Her fingers gripping the scissors were white. "You wouldn't dare," she breathed. "You wouldn't shoot your own kinfolk—and that poor girl."

Vane merely grinned at her and pulled at his nose. Lobo announced that a second wagon had turned down the grade. Hill folks on their way home, Owen thought. They would turn off where the road branched, a mile or so beyond the station.

"That's the Pritchetts," Lobo remarked as the first wagon passed out front. "We can't wait much longer, Ed. We've been here over an hour, and when that stage doesn't show up on time at railhead they'll start telegraphing."

Owen said, "You know where he's putting you with his foolishness, Lobo? He's putting you right where he was heading, the Yuma pen."

Vane whirled. "Shut up!" he said brutally, looking a little on edge himself, as though the strain were beginning to tell. "We got nothing to worry about," he told Lobo in a calmer voice. "As soon as they show I'll duck in that brush by the road. It won't take any longer than it takes you to sneeze. Then we'll be on our way."

"They're getting married and going home to pack. They can get hitched in ten, fifteen minutes."

They both stayed at the window, and their tempers were short. Vane was the top hand, though, Owen thought, and Lobo wouldn't be likely to buck him. Vane had probably talked him into breaking the law to begin with, for Lobo seemed to be the kind who needed someone he could lean on.

Vane, on the other hand, having learned the truth of what he'd suspected all along, was just crazy stubborn enough to wait here for Brock, if it took the rest of the day. He had been crossed, and he was set to kill. Without him around there would be a chance to get at Lobo, Owen decided.

"How's Graham?" Imer asked.

"I feel a mite better," Graham told him. Connie had finished wrapping the wound, and he looked gratefully at her. "Felt like a boulder hit me when it happened. I just

caught a flash of the gun where it was hidden back of the cushion, but I grabbed at it too late."

VANE made a sudden sharp sound of pleasure, and Owen ducked a little so he could look through the window. There was a stir of dust high up on the slope. "There's a buggy," Vane said. "Yeah, that's them, all right! Lobo, you watch this outfit. Don't worry about what goes on out there. When I'm through I'll bring the horses around front."

"You better be careful," Lobo said worriedly. "You hit the girl with that scatter gun and everybody in the Territory'll be after us."

Vane looked hurt. "I wouldn't shoot her."

He turned to the door and slipped out, as though he had only the one thing in mind and meant to see it through. Connie gripped Owen's wrist.

"Stop him," she whispered fiercely. Her eyes were hard, her fingers like clamps around his wrist.

Owen glanced at Lobo who, despite the rifle, had the air of a man that is cornered. He met Owen's glance uneasily and muttered, "You just stay put, mister."

"You'll soon be regretting what's happening here today," Owen told him. "Did you ever stop to think that the minute he kills Brock you'll be a party to murder? That means you'll hang, Lobo."

A muscle jumped in Lobo's face, and his head jerked as Imer got up from the wall. For a second it looked as though he meant to tell Imer to sit back down, but nothing came out. Then Willie and Clem rose and stretched their legs. Lobo's eyes jerked away from them and back to Owen, who started across the room at a slow pace.

"You'd better give me that rifle, Lobo," he said quietly.

"Stay where you are!"

Owen came on, and so did the other three men. They moved slowly in on Lobo, and a quick fear jumped in the man's eyes. Maybe he would break, Owen thought, and maybe he wouldn't.

The rifle was pointed at Owen, but he said in that same quiet voice, "You might get me, Lobo, but the rest of 'em will get you, and you'll hang." He let the "hang" linger, trying with the word to show Lobo a picture of twisting limbs and a blackened face.

Lobo said in a voice that tried to be tough, "I told you to stay where you are." But they converged on him silently and he backed into the corner, his mouth twitching. "I said—" he began weakly, and bit his lip so hard that blood showed, his breath coming hoarsely.

Then he gave a moan of complete surrender, his eyes glazed, and he came apart at the joints. The rifle clattered to the floor and he sank down, dropped his head between his knees, and commenced to sob wildly; his shoulders shuddering.

Owen had the rifle, and he jerked the gun from Lobo's holster. Imer took his shotgun from the table.

"You'd better go out the back way," Imer said. "I'll see what I can do with this from here."

"They got a ways to go yet," Clem said from the window.

"You all stay inside," Owen told them.

He heard Connie say, "You be careful and come back to me." Then he was out the back door, had eased it shut gently, and was running to come around the barn and corrals, wanting to get between Vane and the buggy.

He came around the corrals running hard and low, and heard the sound of hoofs and wheels along the road. He couldn't see the road because of the brush and boulders, but a rise of dust showed him the buggy's progress. He ran on, straight for the road now, for wondering where Vane had holed up was hard on the nerves. When he was a hundred feet or so from the road, he saw the buggy almost directly ahead of him.

He put a shot in front of the team and shouted, "Brock, turn back quick! Vane's after you!"

HE WAS still running, watching Brock haul on the reins, looking back his way and swinging the team at the same time. Then Vane came running from the brush along the road. As he slid to a stop to fire at the buggy, Owen took quick aim, fired, and missed. But it was close, for Vane

threw himself into the brush again without shooting.

"I'll get you for that, Owen!" Vane screamed.

"Give up, man!" Owen yelled back. "You're better off at Yuma than in a pine box."

He ran forward as hard as he could for fifty feet, knowing Vane would never give up, and stopped to fire a shot where the outlaw had disappeared in the brush. Then he slid on his belly to a boulder ten yards away, and waited there a minute to catch his breath.

He looked up the road then and saw the buggy parked out of danger on the first climbing switch-back. He came around the boulder at a crouch, then stopped again, hearing the scrape of boots off to his left. He caught a glimpse of Vane's leg in the brush, but before he could fire it was gone.

Owen knew what he faced in that double-barreled sawed-off loaded with buckshot, and how it could tear a man apart. So he put his back against a boulder and waited again, listening hard, Lobo's sixgun in his hand now, the rifle against his knees.

Something—a lizard, or a brush rabbit perhaps—made a sound to his right. Suddenly the shotgun roared, and the buckshot ripped through brush, cutting it like a scythe. Owen saw the jagged boulder from behind which the shot had been fired, and he knew Vane was there. Quickly he pulled his boots off, rose, and moved soundlessly across the gritty soil until he was less than five yards from the boulder. There he sank down on his knees.

A boot scraped behind the boulder, and the barrels of the shotgun came in sight. Vane wasn't sure and he was cautious, Owen thought. He picked up a rock and lobbed it high and far, and heard it land somewhere behind Vane. Then he sprang up, knowing Vane had turned to scan his back trail. Owen sprang forward then, and came around the boulder just as Vane turned again. For a split second they stared at each other across six feet of space.

Then Owen said, "That's all for you."

Vane laughed and threw himself flat, twisting the shotgun to fire, and Owen shot into him. Vane, hit hard, kept rolling, a hand clawing for one of the Colts at his hip, his teeth bared in a wolfish snarl. Owen shot again.

Vane, eyes glazing, said, "Don't, please don't." Then his whole body jerked and became still.

Owen took Lobo and Vane's body back to town on the stage, after promising Connie he'd be back that evening and stay overnight. "I have a surprise for you," she said, "so don't disappoint me."

Owen couldn't get over the change in her. It wasn't that she said anything about it, and he didn't expect her to, for she wasn't the kind of a girl to go around telling how she felt or what she thought. She'd been set to leave him, and now she wanted him back as though nothing had happened. It was baffling, but Owen liked it just the same. Life would never be dull with Connie, that was for sure.

It was dark by the time he got back, and she stood framed in the doorway, the lamplight behind her. When he entered he saw that she had a new dress on. It was green and had a flowered pattern.

Owen had to swallow. "You must've worked fast to sew it together in one afternoon," he said.

"You can say that again," Imer remarked dryly. "She had me down on the floor, helping cut the pattern."

"Uncle, go look at your horses," Connie said, and Imer chuckled and went outside.

Owen cleared his throat, feeling suddenly young and awkward. "You just deviled me, telling me you were going back east to live with your aunt," he said finally.

She laughed at him, her eyes dancing. "That's something you'll never know, Owen Dunn."

"There's a house empty on Elk Street," Owen said. "It's not much, but it can be fixed up."

"I know the house," she said. "I went through it the other day."

"You're way ahead of me," Owen said.

"Then you'd better start catching up," she told him, and moved into his arms.

Sara said, "I'm staying here if I have to cheat, steal, murder!"

Scalawag's Son

By Jeanne Williams

SARA LAURENCE turned away from watching the empty white road and Brenda Karlson's house on the hill. The sight of the house was like a slap in the face, because Sara could see people working up there and knew they weren't coming to Jackie's party. Forcing a smile to her lips, she went over to her son and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Everyone's busy this time of year." She tried to make her voice confident. "I guess they'll be a little late." It was unthinkable that people, her neighbors, would punish Jackie because his father, Trav Laurence,

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SARA WANTED a decent life for her son . . . but not at the price of being unfair to her husband's memory

had fought for the Union. The war had been over five years ago and Trav had been killed two years before that, even. Surely people didn't have such long, cruel memories, not when it was a little just-seven-years-old boy who would suffer!

Or could they?

Looking down at her son's dark head, Sara's heart swelled with terrible fear. She could stand it herself; she had only been seventeen when she married Trav, but he had been wearing the blue uniform, and they had both realized what that meant to their southern friends and families. But Trav, with his dark laughing eyes and straight broad shoulders, had been killed a few days before Jackie's birth, and Sara was left alone to face the music.

Bitter music she was finding it, too, on this day two months after she had come to live on Trav's family's old place. She hadn't been able to come till Trav's parents were dead. They had never forgiven him for going into the Union Army. Her own parents had helped all they could, but she had had to manage, by teaching school in Kansas, to keep Jackie clothed and fed till the death of the older Laurences had left her at least a home, here in Texas.

How hopeful she had been, two months ago, that she and Jackie would have a good life! She had tried to believe the chill courtesy of the people she met was natural treatment to strangers—but this failure of Jackie's party— She clenched her hands. There was nothing to believe but the truth. They hated her and her son.

"I tried to tell you, mother." Jackie whirled suddenly, his mouth working, a cornered, desperate blaze in his eyes. "No one's going to come! Blake Karlson told me so yesterday when he wouldn't let me in his yard to play. He said I was a scalawag, and that daddy was one, too. Is that true, mother?"

Scalawag—a southerner turned friendly to the Union for his own profit and safety. In the days during and right after Reconstruction, a more hated name couldn't be dug up and hurled. Sara, with stunned anger, hugged her son close so he couldn't see her face and thought passionately, Oh, Jackie, darling, what have I done to you? She and Trav had been old enough to make their decisions, but Jackie was paying for them.

"Jack, listen." Her voice caught. She fought to keep it level and strong. "Your father wasn't a scalawag, he was a soldier, a brave one, who fought for what he believed in. That's all anyone can do. It took more courage than fighting on the side everyone expected him to, remember that! He wasn't scared of what people thought, and you and I aren't going to be, either."

JACKIE nodded, the black curls brushing her cheek. "Yes, ma'am. But—no one's coming to my party." The words were wrung from him in childish heartbreak. His shoulders shook, and he turned away from the two-layer cake with melting chocolate frosting and awry candles which she had spent the morning making.

Murderous rage swelled up in Sara. Horrible, wicked people to do this to a little boy! She patted his head, though, and said brightly, "Don't fret, Jackie. We'll have a nice party together, and then you can go practise with the new lasso I got you. Won't that be fun?"

"Sure, mother." He nodded, but she knew the only thing that kept him from crying his soul out was the fact that big, seven-year-old boys don't cry, not when they're the only man their mother has.

She whirled over to the stove. "I'll light the candles. Then you make your wish, shut your eyes, and blow hard!"

Gravely, he screwed his eyes shut, and his dimple showed by the edge of his mouth as he puckered his lips. What can he wish for that he has any chance of getting here? Sara thought savagely. She shut her own eyes a minute and when she opened them Jackie was crying, "Mother! Mother, I blew out all seven!" and there was a tall man coming up the stoop.

It was Brenda Karlson's foreman, Steve Rangerford, the only person in the neighborhood who had spoken to Sara with any

gentleness or humor. He was big and sandy-headed, with clear gray eyes, and he limped a little from a grapeshot wound he'd caught at Gettysburg, but it didn't cramp him any. Sara had always returned his interest with curtness, though. It rankled to take comfort from Brenda Karlson's foreman. Now, at the door, he swept off his hat and grinned.

"Say, Jack, that's a handsome cake. Reckon I might have a bite?" To Sara, ducking his head, he added, "Howdy, Mrs. Laurence."

Sara started to snap at him to go on home and not bother with his sympathy, but she saw the light in Jackie's eyes, the eager glow, and she said weakly, "Hello, Mr. Rangerford. Do sit down." She got a knife and shared the cake, poured tea for them all, and sat down, staring at her son.

Gone was the apathy, the dogged effort to keep his chin up. He was laughing and chattering on to Steve about his new lasso and the stray cat he'd adopted and how many eggs he'd gathered that morning.

Steve listened with grave attention, asking a question now and then and considering Jackie's answers as if they had been another adult's. Sara realized, with a stab of compunction and some jealousy, that Jackie must miss a man to take an interest in him more than she had thought. She bit her lip, crumbling cake with her fork.

That need would grow as Jackie got older. She could have remarried, several times; she was just twenty-four and she knew, without vanity, that she was prettier than she had been at seventeen. Her mirror and the more electric reflection in men's eyes told her that. But none of the Kansas men had stirred her, and down here it seemed the few single men were too full of hate and bitterness for love.

GLANCING involuntarily at Steve, her gaze tangled with his and she flushed, looking away. Steve was being nice on account of Jackie, but he was Brenda Karlson's foreman. Brenda, a vibrant red-head, widowed several years ago when her husband was killed in a stampede, had made it plain that she didn't want the Laurences for neighbors. Remembering her first meeting with the woman, Sara's cheeks burned.

She had gone up to see if she could trade eggs for some kind of meat—and also to meet the neighbor she hoped would be a friend. Brenda, high-breasted and imperious, had met her on the porch and kept her there.

The K-Sun, Brenda informed coldly, raised everything it needed, including eggs. No, they didn't have any meat for sale. And didn't Mrs. Laurence find it hot here after Kansas?

Sara, with a voice that shook in spite of her efforts to control it, had answered that she found the region very pleasant, thank you, and had gone back home fighting a mad impulse to run and not stop till she was in the house with the doors locked against the hostile, cruel world outside.

Brenda's insults were delivered with the smilingly poisonous way of a woman, but her son Blake's gibes at Jackie were vicious, so brutal that Sara had finally ordered Jackie not to play with the other boy. She wondered if Steve knew what went on. He was still talking with Jackie and she stole the chance to watch him closely.

He had a lean, bony face, wide-spaced eyes, and a long mouth that right now was relaxed in a nice grin. Sara shook her head. No, Steve couldn't possibly guess how the Karlsons had acted. He looked too decent and kind to let it go on, even if he was hired help. He drank the last of his coffee now and shot a questioning glance at Sara.

"Mind if Jackie and I go fishing? I know a pretty good hole at the bend of the creek. Guess you wouldn't mind cleaning a whole passel of fish?"

"I'll clean all you catch!" Sara smiled back in spite of herself. "Now, Jackie, mind Mr. Rangerford, and don't get wet."

"Name's Steve," the foreman cut in, his crowsfeet crinkling. "And, gosh, what fun's fishing if you can't get your feet wet? You got a boy here, not a sugar doll. Sure you wouldn't like to come?"

For a second, Sara almost said yes. Then she remembered that gossip might get started if the word got around. Primly she shook her head. "No, thank you. I've work to do."

His hand rested on Jackie's shoulder. "Work's fine, but you can overdo it. How long's it been since you really laughed, Mrs. Laurence?"

Before she could form her shocked thoughts into words, he was gone with her son, matching his long stride to Jackie's. Hand on her throat, Sara watched after them, then turned back to clearing off the table with more banging than was necessary.

It was a long time since she had felt like anything but a mother who was widowed and somehow had to make a good life for her child. Steve's warm glance had said she was an individual, a woman, whose own personal experiences were far from over. She realized this with surprise, and then as another, uglier suspicion struck, she banged dishes louder than ever.

Maybe Steve thought she might be inordinately grateful for his stray kindnesses; maybe he thought a lonely woman would get desperate for company and pay highly for it, especially in a country where other people were busy hating her. Only he was so good with Jackie . . . Surely no man could be that low down! She stared at the large, half-eaten cake, and the stinging pain and resentment lashed through her again.

PEOPLE could be plenty low down; they had proved it that very day. No, couldn't afford to be friendly with the foreman of her worst enemy. Perhaps Steve had looked at Brenda in that same confident, teasingly respectful way. After all, Brenda was young and hotly beautiful.

Sara took the dishpan off the wood stove, where the water had been heating, and started washing dishes. It wouldn't be half as strange for Steve to love his employer as for him really to care about a widow, the wife of a man the country called a scalawag. She lifted her chin. Whether the people liked it or not, this was her son's home. He would go to school here and grow up here, and some day the reasonless prejudice would die. It had to!

It was almost sundown when Steve and Jackie came home with a line of catfish. Sara was glad that Steve helped Jackie clean them. She dipped them in flour, salted them and fried them, along with cornmeal balls. Steve stayed for supper. He said it was Sunday, and anyway he had a free day coming. After Jackie was in bed Steve hung around, seeming all long arms and legs as he tried to help with the dishes.

"You aren't letting today get you down?" he blurted at last. "The party, I mean?"

Sara wrung out the dishrag, slapped it over the pan. "You bet I'm not! If I ever get a chance, I'll make every one of these spiteful people sorry!"

"Oh," said Steve. He was silent a minute, studying her. "I was afraid you'd feel that way. It did hurt bad, I know. But look. These people lost the war, and then they got tromped by Reconstruction. They're not being very careful where they hate. You hate them and they'll hate you harder. There's no end to that, and it's Jackie who'll be hurt worst. For his sake, you've got to make friends, learn to live with those folks."

Bitterly, Sara laughed. "I tried. Look what happened."

"You have to keep trying. Go among 'em till they get sense enough to see you're just a woman, a darned pretty one, with a little boy to raise. Make 'em realize you're *people*, not enemies to stick a label on and be mean to." He had spoken with a fierce intensity that startled Sara, but he straightened and his old calm returned. "If Jack were my kid, I reckon I could put pride in my pocket so he could keep his."

After the struggles she had made it galled to have an outsider weigh her and find her wanting. Sara shrugged, curling her lip.

"Oh, you'd have no trouble, Mr. Rangerford. You're a Texan who fought for the Confederacy! Everyone thinks you ought to be proud, while Jackie and I—" She broke off, choked by grief and anger.

Boys had a right to be proud of their fathers, to believe their fathers had died for something worth while. But Jackie would grow up with "scalawag's son" drumming in his ears.

Steve picked up his hat. His limp was more pronounced than she had ever seen it.

"I got plain worn out with people hating during the war.

"Hope you aren't going to take it up, Sara."

He seemed not to notice he had used her first name and paused in the doorway to say, "Fall round-up starts in a couple of days. All the ranches are gathering their stock on the K-Sun for the drive north. I'm going to be trail boss, so you won't see me for quite a spell. You made arrangements to get Jackie a ride to school yet?"

One more thing to worry about. Sara's heart stopped, then beat harder as she clenched her hands. Steve Rangerford had his nerve, acting as if she weren't doing her best for Jackie!

"I haven't," she said, "but I will. He's going to have his education, don't think he isn't."

Steve stood there as if wanting to say something else. Then, as if the look on her face stopped him, he nodded and went out. Now why was I so nasty to him, Sara wondered. He's the only person around here who cares about Jackie. But then she reminded herself that Steve was Brenda's foreman, and stiffened her spine.

There were two immediate problems brought on by the coming fall weather. She had to have a supply of firewood for the big heating stove and kitchen range, and Jackie needed a ride to school. It was eight miles away, a cruel walk in bitter weather, even for a strong adult.

Sighing, she blew out the lamp.

AFTER the insult of having Jackie's party ignored, Sara dreaded contact with anyone. But, as the week passed, she knew she must get on with solving her two most pressing problems. She had no horse or wagon, but she did have two cows and some laying hens. Brenda had scornfully refused any barter, but Sara resolved to try bargaining with Tom Grady, who owned a small ranch to the north, and Schultz Brackmann, a German emigrant who ran a saw-mill. On Saturday morning she put on her best blue cotton and a prewar bonnet, and tucked a clean handkerchief into her reticule.

"Now you stay right here, Jackie," she told him, kissing his cheek. "There's bread and butter and pie for lunch, and I'll be back this afternoon."

The dust billowed up on her skirts as she started out on her long walk, twenty miles of heat and grit if she had to go to both places.

"*Ach,* I am sorry," grunted Schultz Bruckmann, his blue eyes troubled in his rosy broad face. "I would like to sell you the scraps for firewood, Mrs. Laurence, but if I did I'd lose my other customers. Some of them have already warned me."

"So you'd see my little boy freeze?"

Brackmann spread his hands pleadingly. "I am sorry. But all I have is this mill. I have come a long way to make such prosperity as I have for my wife and small children. A man must look after his own, yes?"

"I suppose so," Sara said coldly, turning away. But what happens to families without men to look after them?

"Come in and have the dinner with my wife and me," Brackmann called after her. "We have good sausage and pudding."

It was noon, and the long walk had made Sara faint with weariness and hunger, but she wouldn't let the mill-owner salve his conscience. She said without looking back, "No, thank you," and walked on.

Tom Grady, who rumors had claimed was a guerrilla in the bloody Kansas-Missouri border fighting, braced his hands on his thick waist and studied Sara speculatively. His bright dark eyes were an insult, but she endured it, tight-lipped. Grady had two school-age children whom he drove to their classes in his wagon and it wouldn't be any trouble for him to take Jackie, too, since the road ran past the Laurence place.

Put your pride in your pocket Steve had

said. She didn't think she had any left. Grady's thick lips shaped into a grin, and he shoved back a shock of thick black hair.

"Reckon we could do with eggs and some butter. Our hens aren't laying good, and the kids drink so much milk the missus can't save enough for churning. No reason why I oughtn't to be neighborly and oblige you."

OBLIGE? When he was going right past their home anyway and would be getting free eggs and butter now? Sara longed to tell him he was getting paid for his favor, but strained back the words. At least Jackie had a way to school.

"Thanks," she said, and turned, but Grady was beside her with a long stride.

"Glad you're getting sensible," he smirked. "Me and most of the other men would've treated you nice long ago if you'd not been stuck up. It's the women who've got in for you—especially Brenda Karlson. Guess she never has got over Trav Laurence's marrying you instead of her."

Trav—Brenda? Shocked, yet believing, Sara backed from Grady.

"So that's it."

"Yeah, that 's it," chuckled Grady, as if it were a good joke. "But you don't need to worry about her. Just be nice to me and I'll—" His hand closed on her arm and he would have kissed her mouth, if her stunned outrage hadn't given her the panic strength to wrench free.

"Why, you—" she blazed. His face, set in ugly cunning, looked like an animal's as he moved forward, but Sara slipped to where they could be seen from the house. "You touch me and I'll scream so loud your wife'll hear!"

His jaw moved sullenly, but he stopped. "All right," he said, glowering, "all right! Have it your way. You can carry your brat piggy-back to school—if they'll let a scalawag in!"

"At least," flashed Sara, "my husband fought men! He didn't burn houses and steal cattle all over the Kansas border like you did."

Grady's eyes glittered, but he finally shrugged, with a barking laugh that was wholly callous.

"You're mighty smart, aren't you? See if it'll keep you warm and healthy this winter. Nothing else will!" He turned on his heavy booted heel.

Choking with shame and fury, Sara whirled away. As she hurried down the road she heard a shrill nagging woman's call from the Grady house: "Tom Grady, you get up here! Don't be talking to a woman with no more shame than to go around by herself."

How else would I go? Sara bit her lips till the blood ran. As she walked, the flush of energy anger had loaned her ebbed away at each blistered step. Despair weighted her down till she could have crawled back into the shade of the stunted trees and wept, if it weren't for Jackie waiting at home.

Somewhere, even among these hating people, there must be one decent enough to help if they knew how badly she needed it. But she had tried her neighbors and found nothing but insults, fear, or scorn. It was for Jackie that she couldn't bear it.

She ground her teeth, realizing the twisting power of hatred, for if she could in that

Movie News Roundup by BOB CUMMINGS—Next Issue!

RANCH FLICKER TALK

A Review of Universal's

MAN WITHOUT A STAR

with KIRK DOUGLAS and JEANNE CRAIN

PLUS

A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

JEFFREY HUNTER

moment have killed Brenda and Tom Grady, she would have done it gladly. She wished Tom Rangerord could have seen how useless his calm advice was. But he was busy with the round-up and, if she ever saw him again, it wouldn't be for weeks.

Her shoes had worn blisters on her feet. She took them off and walked on, each mile torture. Maybe she should have stayed in Kansas and tried to sell the Laurence farm for the little it would have brought. There, at least, Jackie wasn't treated as the son of a traitor. What would happen to him if they stayed here?

AS SHE turned in the gate, Sara glanced around, expecting to see Jackie hustling about his chores or perched on the stoop watching for her. But he wasn't in sight, and the door was shut. Sara caught up her skirts and rushed up, pushing into the house. She stopped and stared at the crock of fresh butter she had churned the night before. It was smashed all over the kitchen floor, with dirty small heelmarks griming it. Sara had meant to trade it for some groceries.

A smothered sob came from the door to the bedroom. Sara turned to see Jackie clinging to the door knob, his face tear streaked and splotched with dried blood.

"Jackie!" she cried, running to him and catching him in her arms. "What happened? Who hurt you?"

"The butter all got ruined!" Jackie was weeping, plainly more hurt by his failure to protect the house than by his bloody nose. "I tried to chase Blake out, but he hit me with a stick and shoved the crock off the table. I hit him, and then he yelled and kicked me and said daddy was a sneaking dirty yellow scalawag. That's what he said! And I threw the tea kettle at him and busted the handle, and he ran home hollering. He said none of the kids will play with me at school. He said they'd take off my shirt and paint yellow on my back. Oh, mother—"

He put down his dark head and cried as he had before she had taught him that big seven-year-olds don't cry. Sara held him close and rocked him back and forth. She spoke to him soothingly, softly, but she didn't know her own words, for inside she was seething.

Hot tears stung her eyes, choked the voice in her throat. She rocked on wordlessly, cradling her child. He was the dearest thing in her life, yet because she was his mother Jackie would never have peace here. He'd be hounded and tormented and ridiculed.

It couldn't be borne. No matter what happened, she was taking him out of this place. Maybe it was already too late, but no more Blake Karlsons would blackguard his father to him.

"Don't cry, Jackie," she said harshly. "We're going away. We'll go to Kansas, and someway I'll make enough to keep us alive. We'll sell this awful farm for anything we can get, and leave."

For a minute Jackie was still, but she felt his small body stiffening in the curve of her arm before he drew back. He wasn't crying. It would have been better if he had been. Sara had never seen such disbelieving dread on anyone's face, as if a last precious dream and glory were turning to a dusty lie.

"Then it's true?" he whispered.

Sara's patience snapped. "What's true?" she asked raggedly.

Jackie's face was white. He turned his small shoulders, squaring them pathetically, but when he spoke they dropped anyway.

"Daddy must be what they say, a scalawag. It must be true, or we wouldn't run off."

"Run off?" Whipping to her feet, Sara caught his shoulders, spun him to face her. Was she going to have to fight the world and her son, too? His eyes, so like Trav's, looked up at her. She dropped her hands from him.

TRAV had fought because he believed all men should be free. He had given up friends and family and his place to do it. It hadn't been easy, but at least his son had believed his father was brave, a soldier, a hero. He had fought for his father's name.

Couldn't she do as much? Fight for the pride of her son? If he couldn't be proud of his father, could he ever be proud of anything, no matter where they went, no matter how far they ran? The thoughts raced through her mind in an instant. She patted Jackie's arm and straightened.

"We won't run, honey. Your daddy would never run, and we won't either. Now you gather the eggs and stay here while I take a walk."

Her walk was to the K-Sun. Cutting through the pasture, she saw where the ranch's herds were being gathered down in a long valley. Small branding fires burned here and there where men wrestled down the calves and marked and branded them. One fire burned unattended up on the ridge she came over. The men must have knocked off for coffee, or else had been called to another fire for a while. Sara kept to the far side of the ridge till she came to the Karlson house.

Brenda, in whipcord riding skirt and snug plaid shirt, was just getting ready to leave the house. Sara wondered if she were going to see Steve, but only one thing was important right then. She stepped in front of the flaming-haired woman, barring the way.

"Mrs. Karlson, I want you to understand something. No matter what you do, I'm staying here and raising my son. If I have to lie, cheat, steal or murder! I'd think you, having a child, would act half decent, but that doesn't matter. We're staying!"

Brenda said nothing, though her green eyes hardened. Sara turned away.

"I'll drive you out!" Brenda snarled.

Sara looked back with a thin little laugh. "We'll see," she said. She went out through the corrals, and nervous reaction hit her, the let-down that follows anger. She had promised Jackie to stay and she had defied Brenda, but what would the end of it be? Maybe her other neighbors would come round someday, but Brenda was implacable, a cruler foe than a man. It was then that, rounding the ridge, Sara saw that the unguarded branding fire had scattered up and down the slope in a rough line. She saw what had spread it, too.

Blake, Brenda's son, had a pole and was scattering the flame, coaxing the red streamers to blaze into grass-eating monsters. In another five minutes the fire would lick over the hill and spread down the slope, too late for the men to put it out. It would burn the cattle, ruin the K-Sun range, and bring heavy money loss to every one of the spiteful people who had called Trav names and hurt Jackie. She could just walk on home.

But somehow Sara couldn't. Those ranchers' whole painful struggle to win out over the ruin of war and Reconstruction lay in the valley. She couldn't let it be lost, in spite of their hate. She ran up the ridge and down the slope, calling the men, and Steve came up to her, running.

"Fire!" she cried. "All along the ridge!"

Steve whirled, barked orders. Steers were hustled up the ridge, killed, and slit open, their bodies dragged over the blazing line of flame. Blake had been booted home at once by angry men. Twenty minutes of frenzied battling, and the flames were out. Sara started on home, but Steve came up to her and she turned to see a knot of embarrassedly-grinning cattlemen gathering.

"We'd like to apologize," said Tom Grady, stepping forward. "You could have let us burn out, but you didn't. I'd be proud to drive your boy to school this fall and get you wood, too."

"We all think," added Steve, "that you deserve a couple of head out of each herd—get you started in the cattle business like all your neighbors." The others all backed this up fervently, but before Sara could dazedly mutter her thanks, Steve had her arm, leading her away.

"I guess I didn't need to give you that lecture," he said. "I guess I didn't need to tell you anything except the one thing I didn't say. I love you, Sara. I want a place with my own family, and you and Jackie can't be beat. What do you say?"

"I say," whispered Sara, "that Jackie has two fathers he can be proud of!"

Parson Bond Sits in

a true story

by

Bob and Jan Young

PARSON SILAS BOND, sky pilot at Lost Lake, Nevada, was likely to do almost anything to save a wandering soul, or a life.

As guardian of the morals for the Cain-like desert boom-town of Dry Dock, the Parson naturally gravitated toward the camp's principal saloon. He was always there, of course, in his official soul-recruiting capacity, but Parson Bond also had a unsaintly fondness for watching men match skill and pasteboards in the high-stake poker games.

The parson was relaxing in a creaking captain's chair, watching a game, when a long-haired, deeply-tanned stranger strode in.

After wiping away imaginary drops of whisky with the back of his hand, and settling his glass, the stranger asked; "Mind if I sit in for a spell?"

His question was directed to "Canada Sam" Jeffries, dealing the draw game. Canada Sam nodded approval, and shoved over a stack of chips, as the stranger pitched down a pair of golden doubles eagles.

"Going far?" Sam asked casually after a few hands had been dealt.

The other players eyed the stranger questioningly when Canada Sam asked. Most men were voluble after they'd wandered across the desert into Lost Lake, but this character was different; he just didn't say anything. The Parson leaned forward to hear what he might have to offer.

"Yep. Going quite a piece north," the stranger replied pleasantly, succinctly. "I'll call," he added, returning attention to his cards and the game. "I'm mostly called Bill," he offered then.

Usually, tight-lipped men like him are on the dodge, Parson Bond observed to himself. But this one doesn't pack guns, though his hand don't show any signs of work.

But, with the summer's heat sizzling the desert, the Parson knew it wasn't uncommon to run across a stranger who had doffed his sixguns along with his coat, string tie, and anything else that would mitigate the discomfort of the broiling temperature.

By their consistently heavy betting, Canada Sam and the stranger gradually narrowed the game down to almost a duet. Sam's forehead, beaded with sweat as the stranger kept raising the stakes. "Bill's" chips were heaped high in front of him, and Sam was taking the brunt of the losses.

THEN came the hand.

Sam raised on the first open, and the stranger raised back. There was one more raise before the draw. Sam drew one card. So did the stranger. As the betting was nearing a finish, with all the chips in the center of the green baize-topped table, Canada Sam sneezed explosively and so violently that his hand nearly knocked the remainder of the deck from the table.

Parson Bond didn't see or hear anything wrong, but he had sense enough to seek cover when he saw Bill pin Sam's hands on the table.

"All bets are in, dealer," the stranger said coldly. "Now just turn over the hand—as is!"

His hand released Sam's smooth fingers from four kings, the deuce of clubs and the ten of spades. Six cards!

The stranger nodded knowingly. "I've got four little treys and a jack, as according to the rules. I take the pot with a legitimate hand. All right?"

His hand dipped toward the heap of gold coins and house checks, but they stopped midway when a derringer whirred into the hands of Canada Sam.

"No, it isn't all right, Mister Bill—or whatever they call you. You must have slipped that extra card into my hand," Sam snarled. He wiggled the derringer menacingly at the stranger, who calmly ignored the threat and continued to stuff the money into his pockets, knowing that even a houseman wouldn't cut down an unarmed man.

"My guns are back in the hotel along with my coat. I'll be back to settle this with you in a half hour," he remarked as he pushed away from the table.

Parson Bond worriedly watched him stalk from the depths of the Dry Dock saloon. This was a blood-letting about to boil over, as sure as he was sitting there. And there was nothing he could do about it. He looked at the fuming Canada Sam, who was still explaining about the obvious knavery of Bill.

The Parson crooked a finger at Sam, beckoning him over. Then the men settled into a whispered conversation.

Parson Bond smiled as he left the saloon. "It may not be quite according to the gospel, but it will certainly be worth trying, if it will save a life," he mused as he walked toward the hotel. He didn't have to walk the whole distance. He met Bill slowly riding his horse toward the saloon. Parson Bond noted that his guns were now buckled on and thonged down.

"You don't have to bother going back,

Bill," the Parson said as he looked up. "Canada Sam has suddenly left town for another engagement he just recently remembered."

The stranger angled his eyebrows questioningly.

"Why, what caused his rush, Reverend?"

"Well, you see, son," the Parson explained, "no man should break the Fifth Commandment." He cleared his throat embarrassedly. "To prevent that I was forced to tell a slight prevarication which induced Canada Sam to believe that your name was Bill, all right—Wild Bill Hickok. And then he decided to leave."

The stranger smiled, a relieved sort of smile, it seemed to the Parson.

"After all, Bill, you do look something like him," the Parson argued. "At least from what I've heard. I've never seen him myself. You *will* ride on now, won't you, Bill?"

Bill reached over and patted his shoulder. "Yep, Parson, I'll be moseying along. I've got quite a ride anyway. And thank you, Parson, for helping me. Here's something for the plate next Sunday."

Parson Bond neatly caught the pair of double eagles which Bill pitched to him.

Beaming, pleased with himself, the Parson re-entered the Dry Dock, desperately thinking of some excuse to quiet Sam, who must still be waiting, as he had promised. With Bill on his way out of town, it shouldn't be too difficult.

He push the batwings apart, nearly knocking the sheriff down. "Where's Sam?" he asked the lawman. "I want to tell him the stranger is loping on out of town. Everything's all right."

The sheriff let out a long breath of relief. "Canada Sam's long gone, Parson," he answered. "Sam thought he might have made a mistake on that last hand after all—especially after I told him the stranger, riding through on his way to Deadwood was Wild Bill Hickok. Bill stopped off at the office when he came in town, and introduced himself to me. First time he's ever been here."

The Parson's face crinkled into a puzzled but relieved expression. "And here I was thinking I told a lie!" he exclaimed exultingly.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. At times these cowboys have paired up as teams in what kind of rodeo contest: Clay Carr with Buck Sorrels, Ross Dollarhide with Chuck Sheppard, John Bowman with Vern Castro?

2. Did you know that Jesse James grew up with a nickname? What was it?

3. The scrub evergreens of the southwest that botanists call junipers are often called what by the local ranch folks?

4. An educated cowboy named N. Howard (Jack) Thorp made up the old cowboy song, "Little Joe, the ....." You fill in the blank.

5. In the northern mountains of what state is the scenic, cliff-bound Cimarrón Canyon?

6. What is the "gringo" slang term meaning "jail" that is derived from the Spanish word *juzgado?*

7. Before becoming a famous novelist, Emerson Hough, author of "The Covered Wagon," practiced law in the mining camp of White Oaks, in what Territory?

8. If a range boss told a cowhand to "roll his bed and dust," what would he mean?

9. What were the two largest wild animals of the Old West frontier?

10. Each of the following flowers should remind you of a state: bluebonnet, poppy, columbine, sunflower, yucca. Name the states.

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 112. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

Brunor's taunting voice had reached Lisa from across the street

SUDDEN VIOLENCE

By J. L. Bouma

PETE OLSEN waited for Lisa outside of Mrs. Stern's dress shop. He was a short, husky man of thirty, with broad shoulders. His hair was blond and thick, his eyes a mild blue in his blunt and ruddy face, and his big hands hung in front of him as though they were ready to grasp the tools with which he earned his living. He kept his eyes averted from the two men who lounged in front of the saloon across the street.

They were Fred Brunor and a man called Meager. Pete felt them watching him. Brunor said something, and his harsh laughter slapped Pete Olsen across the sunbright distance. He looked up then and saw Brunor's grinning face.

"Hey, Olsen!" Brunor called. "Tomorrow's the big day, isn't it?".

"It will be my wedding day, yes," Pete Olsen said.

EVERYBODY in town liked slow-moving Pete Olsen . . . but not even the girl he loved had much respect for a man who wouldn't fight

Brunor spat on the boardwalk. "How come we didn't get invited?"

"All our friends are invited," Pete Olsen said.

Brunor laughed again, and then that laughter was suddenly stilled as he looked at something along the street. He spoke to Meager, then both men entered the saloon. Pete Olsen looked around and saw Bill Paxton, the town marshal, coming toward him.

Paxton smiled a slow smile. "It should be a fine day for the wedding." He was a tall man in a rumpled black suit, with a long seamed face and very sharp eyes.

"It will be even if it rains," Pete Olsen said.

Paxton nodded and glanced briefly at the saloon. He murmed, "I'd keep out of Brunor's way if I were you, Pete."

Pete Olsen frowned. He was used to men poking mild fun at him, and this he did not mind, for he had never sensed rancor in it. He felt no anger now, only a faint wonder why men like Fred Brunor took the joy out of simple pleasures with their harsh laughter.

"But why?" he asked. "I have no trouble with Fred Brunor."

"You don't, no," the marshal agreed. He studied Pete with his slow, tolerant smile. "I'm afraid you haven't been over here long enough to understand men like Brunor."

"It is all right," Pete Olsen said. "I have been here two years. My English is still not good, and I know men joke about it, but that is all right." He smiled broadly. "And because I don't wear a gun. But then I'm a carpenter, and I have no use for one."

"Just the same, you'd best stay out of Brunor's way." The marshal hesitated as though there were more he meant to say, but instead he touched Pete's shoulder briefly and walked on.

Pete Olsen turned and gazed through the window of the dress shop, and saw Lisa talking with Mrs. Stern. The big flat paper box containing Lisa's wedding gown lay on the counter. She was as tall as Pete Olsen, with hair only a little darker than his, and lips that smiled as she talked.

THEY had always smiled as she sang, too —and at that thought Pete Olsen knew what it was Marshal Paxton had wanted to say. He sighed and turned away from the window, shaking his head slowly. That was it, though. But what was wrong with a woman's earning her living with her voice, even though it meant singing in a saloon? That should not make her open to talk, as it did the painted women at the Oriental Palace.

It was foolish to think about. Men always had their little jokes when someone married. It was so in the old country, and it was so here, in this New Mexico town. His hands braced on the hitch rack, Pete Olsen looked up and down the street and smiled. The town had grown since his arrival, and a little pride stirred in him at the thought that he had helped in that growth.

He remembered the voyage across the ocean and the half-awed, half-trapped feeling of New York. He remembered working in a gas-lit garment factory and living in a windowless room, his hands restless to follow the trade he had learned in his youth.

So he had worked his way West, accumulating his box of tools as he went. He had arrived here by stagecoach and stopped with the intention of working only long enough to earn a little money before going on to California. Maybe it is what they call fate, he thought now, for here he had remained.

He had liked the town and its people from the beginning. He had fallen in love with the country, the distant mountains rising in the crystal-clear air. And so he had worked at his trade and had been much in demand, for the railroad had come through Bighorn soon after his arrival, and settlers and commerce had come in its wake.

He could walk around town now and see what his hands had accomplished—the new church on the hill, the schoolhouse, three new store buildings and the firehouse. Then there were the out-of-town jobs, the barns and sheds and stables. He had prospered, had two trusted helpers on his payroll. He had the heart for tools and the shaping of wood, and he never thought of his work as labor; to practise his trade gave him a sense of personal possession and pride. And people realized this; they knew he did more than a job of carpentry, and that the work entailed meant as much to him as it did to them.

He turned as the door opened behind him.

Lisa stepped outside, her smile stiff. He saw her glance dart past him to the saloon, then saw the strained expression vanish from around her mouth. And he knew then that Fred Brunor's voice had reached her from across the street, and that she was relieved to find Brunor gone. It roused an odd darkness within him.

He took the paper box from her, and she linked her arm in his. "It's an awfully nice gown," she said. "I only hope I can do it justice."

Her smile warmed him, as it always did. He remembered when she had been married to Roy Maguire, a handsome but shiftless homesteader. Maguire had been killed in a drunken brawl, leaving his widow saddled with a load of debts. She had managed to pay them off by working days as a chambermaid at the hotel, and nights singing at the saloon. It was a hard but honest achievement that had earned her the respect of the townspeople.

As they strolled toward the hotel she gave him an axious side glance and said softly, "You mustn't be troubled by what some people might say."

He looked at her and knew she refered to Fred Brunor.

"No," he said, "it is all right."

She bit her lip. "I wouldn't want anything to happen before the wedding. I couldn't stand it, Pete."

She would be remembering the anguish and worry Maguire had caused her, he thought. "Nothing will happen," he said.

She glanced at him again and seemed reassured by what she saw. She laughed quietly. "You're such a child."

"What do you mean?"

"There's no meanness in you, and you think well of everyone. I like that, Pete. You'll never give me cause to worry."

"Oh no," he said, and was puzzled.

He was a simple man, and his thoughts were long to take root.

Only once in his life had he given way to anger, and he had never forgotten the time nor the place. Yet now that same remembered resentment stirred in him, not against Lisa but the circumstances surrounding this day in his life.

IT CAME to him that he was being taken too much for granted. Yes, that was it. It showed in the tolerant smiles of men like Marshal Paxton, men who respected him as a worker but for no other reason. Because he smiled at their little jokes and wore no gun, he was harmless. He smiled wryly now, not angry but a little disconcerted.

This was a strange country. He remembered a boy named Granger, a foolish boy with a gun and a temper. Men had talked softly in his presence, and they had not joked with him. And even now, though Granger was in the Yuma penitentiary, men still spoke of him with respect.

Lisa said, "A penny for your thoughts," and he smiled at her. They stopped at the hotel. She said, "I still have some packing to do. Don't forget that we're due at Minister Dow's house for supper at six."

"I will be here in plenty of time. First I go to the bank, and then to buy the train tickets."

"Two weeks in San Francisco," Lisa said dreamily. "I can hardly believe it."

She was a changed girl from six months ago—happier now, the brittle tone gone from her voice, her face quiet and at peace. He stood with his hands awkwardly in front of him and watched her.

She touched his cheek with her fingers and murmured, "You're a good man, Pete." Then she turned and entered the hotel.

He walked back along the street, the unsettled feeling still inside him. If only all men could take joy in each other, he thought, and not rouse these little resentments and doubts.

He could remember when Lisa had first sung in the saloon. He had seldom patronized the place, for he was not a drinking man and felt himself a stranger in the boisterous atmosphere. But when Lisa appeared he had spent more and more evenings there, to sit quietly and listen to her songs, to smile when she looked his way.

He had not been alone. Fred Brunor and Meager and men like them, loud, red-faced men who drank heavily, were part of the nightly crowd. But it was Brunor who made the coarse remarks and dug a sly elbow into his neighbor's ribs as Lisa rose to sing.

Brunor who sat at her table and demanded her attention.

Then there was the time she had smiled back at Pete Olsen, the time she had crossed the room to sit with him, her eyes gentle and understanding. He had felt awkward as a schoolboy, yet proud too, a quiet man, slow and patient, smiling at the little jokes and the laughter of the drinkers.

"You mustn't mind them, Mr. Olsen," she had said.

He hadn't minded; he had scarcely taken notice. A new life had been born in him, a life of meaning and of purpose. For the first time had had found himself free to speak of his feelings for this new land, and of his plans and his dreams. And Lisa had listened quietly to his words, quieting his last doubts and giving him the courage to build toward the moment which was now.

"Hey, Olsen! I hear you're taking a little trip after the wedding!"

He looked up and saw Fred Brunor in front of the saloon, Meager grinning beside him. He said heavily, "That is true."

"You'd better watch yourself. You know what those trips do to a man."

He stopped and felt his big hands clench as though they gripped hammers, his mind groping for an answer to this little joke, to make light of it. He forced a smile and crossed the street, and said, "It will be a nice trip for us. We will see the Pacific Ocean."

Brunor threw his head back and laughed. "That all you going to see?" He was a big, dark man, who made an indifferent living dealing in cattle and at the poker tables. Now he turned to wink at Meager. "Olsen's going to Frisco to see the Pacific Ocean. Let's buy him a drink before he goes."

THERE was something in Brunor's voice that made Meager guffaw uncertainly. He said, "Aw, hell—" but Brunor opened the door with one hand and more or less forced Pete Olsen inside.

"Look who we got here! Let's put a ring in his nose, boys!"

Pete blinked in the comparative darkness. He haw Dunkin behind the bar and Carlson, a rancher, talking with Tanner, who owned the lumber yard. There were other faces he recognized along the bar and at the side tables.

"A full bottle, Dunkin," said Fred Brunor. "A man's got a right to get drunk before his wedding. Isn't that so, Olsen?"

Dunkin hesitated, and Carlson and Tanner appeared embarrassed. Pete Olsen felt Brunor's heavy hand push him toward the bar. He forced himself to smile.

"Just a glass of beer, please, Mr. Dunkin," he said.

"Beer, hell!" Brunor said. "I'm buying whisky."

"Thank you just the same, Mr. Brunor," Pete Olsen said, "but beer is fine for me."

Brunor spit. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "Offer a man whisky and he wants beer. What's wrong with you, Olsen? Whisky'll grow hair on your chest."

"Let him drink what he wants," Tanner said.

Brunor turned on him. "Nobody asked you," he said, sounding angry for the first time. "You're drinking whisky, Olsen."

But Dunkin had already poured the beer, and Pete Olsen picked up the glass and said, "This is fine."

Brunor gave a short laugh. "All right," he said, "then you can damn well pay for it yourself." He moved away, saying to no one in particular, "Lucky man that gets a woman who can always sing for her supper."

There was a moment of silence. Pete Olsen felt he knew at last the reason for Brunor's anger. It was because he'd thought of Lisa in one way, and had learned there was another side to her. He had spent a lot of time around her without really getting to know her at all. And then she had shown this other side to Pete Olsen, leaving Brunor baffled and uncertain. Then, little by little, his uncertainty had given way to anger, until now, the day before the wedding, he meant to make trouble.

Marshal Paxton had known this; he had realized the way things were going. And Pete Olsen saw now that Carlson and Tanner and Dunkin knew it, too, and had known it.

Pete put his glass on the bar. "You mustn't say those things, Mr. Brunor," he said.

Brunor had joined Meager at a table. He grinned wickedly. "Did I say something, Olsen?"

"You say bad things and then you make me mad," Pete Olsen said stubbornly. "You should not do it. You should not make me mad."

"Listen to that," Brunor said, and laughed. "What happens if I make you mad, Olsen? Will you strap on a gun and come shooting?"

"No," Pete Olsen said.

"Don't tell me no," Brunor said contemptuously. "If you don't like what I say, either do something about it or get the hell out of here."

Carlson swung his gaze at Brunor and said softly, "That's about enough, Fred. Leave Pete alone."

"No, it is all right," Pete Olsen said. "Let him say what he has to say. But I will tell you something, Mr. Brunor. If you make me fight with you I will hurt you very much. So please be nice and don't say the things that make me mad."

There was another, longer silence, during which Pete Olsen paid for the beer, and Fred Brunor looked at him sharply.

"You threatening me?" he asked finally.

"No," Pete said, "I only say what will happen."

He turned to the door and went out.

DESERT QUEEN

By M. R. KRYTHE

The yucca stands so straight and tall.
White blossoms proudly bearing.
Queen-like, she rules the desert waste,
Her beauty with us sharing.

HE ARRIVED at the hotel dressed in his best suit, and saw Lisa waiting in the lobby. By the tense way she sat, and the way her eyes clung to his as he entered, he knew she had heard of his trouble with Brunor. He stopped as she rose, and waited for her to come to him, and in that moment he hated Fred Brunor for upsetting her.

He turned around and opened the door. Once on the veranda, she swung to face him. She said, softly but harshly, "You must stay away from that man, Pete."

"I will not go looking for him, no."

He took her elbow firmly and led her along the boardwalk. When they came to the side street she started to turn up it, her body rigid against his.

He stopped. "No," he said. "No, Lisa. That is not good."

"We can walk around the block."

Pete Olsen shook his head. "That I will not do," he said heavily. "I have warned him. Now I cannot sneak through alleys to keep out of his way. And you must not ask me to."

They stood looking at each other. She said in a hushed voice, "You mean that, don't you?"

He frowned, feeling awkward, uncertain of what to say or how to say it and still not hurt her. Then footsteps came up behind them and he turned and blinked into the lowering sun.

He heard Marshal Paxton say cheerfully, "If you folks are going up to the minister's house, I'll walk part way with you."

Pete Olsen said nothing. He looked at Lisa and saw her too bright, too relieved smile. "Why, that would be nice," she said, and again linked her arm through Pete Olsen's.

Shadows lay long now in this light, and their own three shadows were without shape as they walked away from the sun. A rig passed, and golden motes of dust swirled and settled in the faint breeze. Lisa's arm tightened as they came opposite the saloon, and her voice lifted with brittle insistence at a burst of laughter that came from where Brunor, whisky in hand, leaned in the doorway.

Paxton murmured dryly, "Saturday night. Time for the boys to have their fun."

"That is not fun," Pete Olsen said darkly.

Lisa said quickly, "Did you get the train tickets, Pete?"

"Yes," he said.

By then they were at the next corner, and Paxton left them with a cheerful word. Lisa and Pete Olsen walked on up the hill to the minister's house, and neither spoke now. He was aware of her relief, and he walked heavily and with his head lowered, seeing clearly that this was all wrong.

When a man planned to build a house he thought first of the fundation, and in that respect marriage was no different. Both had to be built on solid ground or they would not last. He glanced at Lisa and saw that her face was rigid and mask-like, and he wondered if she sensed his thoughts. He wondered if she would remember this night and have to justify to herself the need to run away from trouble.

IT WAS dark when they made their way back down the hill, and he was not surprised to see Marshal Paxton emerge from the deep shadows at the foot of the street. Who does the man think he is fooling? Pete Olsen thought. Does he think I'm a schoolboy, that he walks between me and a bully?

Paxton said in his cheerful voice, "Well, it's a quiet night after all," and moved along with them.

But Pete Olsen stopped. "You are being foolish, Mr. Paxton," he said.

"Please, Pete—" Lisa began.

"No, no," Pete Olsen said. "I think we are all being a little foolish, by making believe there is no trouble."

Paxton said quietly, "It'll all be forgotten by the time you return from San Francisco, Pete."

"Not by me, Mr. Paxton. Lisa will remember, too, and so will many others. Brunor said too much, but I will give him his chance to say more. Then I will fight him."

Lisa drew a sharp breath. "I told you I can't stand that again," she said.

"We make trouble by pretending it is not here," Pete Olsen said gently. "I cannot have this on my mind, and I will not have it on yours. What will you think of me in your heart? That I'm a coward?"

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "Everyone likes you, everyone knows you're a good man."

"Yes, a good man," he said. "A good carpenter, and respected as such. There is more to it than that."

"There's no point in prodding Brunor," Paxton said softly. "If you wear a gun and mean to use it, he will kill you."

"I will not fight him with a gun."

"Even so, he will be too much for you."

"You are a fighting man, and you say this to me?" Pete Olsen said. "You who stood up to that Granger boy and took his gun away from him when he could have killed you?"

"That was my job."

"Your job, yes. With me it is more than a job, Mr. Paxton. I mean to live here the rest of my life."

"Oh, you fool!" Lisa burst out bitterly, and though he could not see her tears in the darkness, he knew she was crying.

He closed and opened his big hands. "It is for us and our right to live here," he said quietly. "Will you see her to the hotel, Mr. Paxton?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned and walked quickly away.

When he entered the saloon later, Marshal Paxton was already inside. The marshal shot him an inquiring look as he entered. Brunor, who leaned with Meager against the bar, glanced up with narrowed eyes. Meager scowled and looked down at his glass.

So Meager is out of it, Pete Olson thought. Meager was a hanger-on who did not mind trouble at a distance, but who crawled into his shell when it came within arm's reach.

Pete stepped up to the bar and said, "A beer, please, Mr. Dunkin."

Then he waited, not looking at Brunor, not looking at anyone in particular.

Dunkin brought the beer, and Pete Olsen took a swallow. There was a pulsing silence in the saloon that Brunor broke with a hoarse chuckle.

"Some men are lucky to have the law tag along at their heels and keep 'em from getting in trouble," he said.

Paxton turned his head and looked carefully at Brunor. "That also applies to you,"

he said. "So see to it that you keep your gun where it belongs, in your holster."

Brunor stepped away from the bar and stood with his legs spread. "So that's how it stands." He grinned wickedly at Pete Olsen, rubbed the bristles along his jaw. "Well, now, I'm a reasonable man, too. What about you, Olsen?"

"I can be reasonable," Pete Olsen said.

"Then that's fine." Brunor grinned. "What with getting married and all, you're a lucky man, Olsen. Think of all the money you'll save. Or did you ever patronize the Oriental Palace?"

Pete Olsen felt as though his breath had been cut off, and he stood in black silence for a moment. Then he put his glass down and said, "I gave you a chance, Mr. Brunor. Now you wait right there."

HE WALKED out of the saloon, and was back at once with the two lengths of wood he had left outside the door. He held one in each hand. They were of heavy oak, about four feet in length, and round as a man's wrist. He threw one in the center of the floor.

Fred Brunor scowled. "What's this?"

"That is your weapon, Mr. Brunor," said Pete Olsen. "Pick it up and fight."

"With that?" Brunor gave a short laugh. "I'll be damned if I do."

Paxton said softly, "Are you afraid?"

Brunor snorted, his face suddenly red. "Why, damn you to hell," he said.

Pete Olsen stepped forward. "Pick it up, Mr. Brunor. If you don't, I will use mine on you and chase you out of town."

"*You* run *me* out of town?" Brunor spit. He stood there crouched forward, a head taller than Pete Olsen, and his hand curled around the butt of his gun.

Paxton snapped, "Throw that gun down and be quick about it!" The marshal had his gun in his hand.

Brunor looked at him a moment, then shrugged and threw his gun against the bar. He glanced around at the faces of the crowd.

"So this is the way he wants it," he said. "I'll break him in half."

"You talk too much, Mr. Brunor," Pete Olsen said quietly.

"I'll show you," Brunor said, and picked up the length of oak, then lunged forward.

Pete Olsen ducked too late. The heavy wood caught him across the shoulders and drove him to his knees. He rolled away, as Brunor swung again and missed. Then the big man swung a third time and caught Pete a glancing blow in the side.

Brunor took his time now, an expression of triumph on his face. As he came in, Pete Olsen blocked the blow with his length of oak, and smashed Brunor on his upper arm.

There was a snapping sound like that of a stick breaking, and Brunor groaned, his face waxen. Before the big man could drop his weapon, Pete Olsen struck him a full swing on the side of his knee, and something crunched in that knee like teeth grinding. Brunor screamed and pitched to the floor.

Pete Olsen stood over him, the heavy oak raised in both hand. "Now, Mr. Brunor," he said, "will you ever again say anything against me or my future wife?"

Brunor, his eyes glazed with pain, looked up at Pete Olsen and cringed. "Never, never," he said. "Get away from me!"

Pete Olsen nodded. He picked up Brunor's length of oak and put it with his own under his arm. "They are the legs for a new table," he said vaguely. He looked around. "I didn't pay for my beer, did I, Mr. Dunkin?"

"It's on the house," Dunkin said gruffly.

Pete Olsen turned to Marshal Paxton.

"I'm sorry to make you this trouble, but it had to be."

Paxton nodded. "Yes," he said heavily, his eyes respectful. "Lisa is outside."

He went outside and found her waiting in the darkness, heard her say, "Pete, Pete, are you all right?"

He smiled. "Yes, Lisa. And you? You're not angry with me?"

"I was afraid," she said.

"It is all right to be afraid," he said. "It is only bad to run from fear. But now everything is fine, and we know where we stand."

"Yes," she murmured, and smiled up at him. Arm in arm they moved slowly along the dark street.

By the time they got the fire out, half the back wall was gone

Firebrand Gal

By V. E. Thiessen

LON RANKIN was just about to pull down the door shade that had "Closed" painted on the outside of it, when his last customer arrived. He heard footsteps on the boards in front, and then the voice.

"Please! I have to talk to you."

Lon's hand froze on the door frame, because no one in Terrapin Fork had been heard to say "please" since the first rickety frame buildings had gone up, two years ago. But mostly, Lon was startled because the voice was a woman's. In Terrapin Fork only one kind of woman was ever out at 11:30 at night, and that kind didn't know "please" was in the language.

Curious, he unhooked a lantern from its

A FEMALE and a gun make a dangerous combination—

especially when the girl has marriage on her mind

nail and opened up. She was a small girl, with black hair that shone even in the dim moonlight.

"You *are* the owner of this cafe?" Her voice was musical and friendly.

"Sure am," Lon said. "What can I do for you, ma'am?"

The girl's white teeth flashed in a smile. "You can ask me in, for one thing, and offer me a cup of coffee, for another."

He pulled the door open and held the lantern, then closed the door when she was inside. She sat down on one of the tall stools by the counter. Lon sneaked a look at her as he poured coffee from the blue-and-white pot. She was the prettiest little thing he'd ever seen. He found himself wishing his two-by-four joint was big and impressive, like the Pearl Saloon.

"Now," he said, taking the stool next to her, "who, what, and why?"

The girl smiled. "I'm Mary Candola, Rich Candola's sister."

Lon's cup stopped halfway to his mouth. He set it back down on the counter. "This place isn't for sale, ma'am. I told your brother that."

For a moment he studied her, remembering how Rich Candola wanted to buy this place because it was right across from the Pearl. But Lon had dreamed about a spot of his own for years—nothing fancy, but clean, where folks could be proud to come for Sunday dinner or just for a cup of coffee. He'd used up five years riding shotgun for Wells Fargo to get the money. He'd had to kill men, and he'd hated every minute of the job. But finally he'd saved enough, and this was what he had for a beginning. He was very much attached to it.

Mary Candola smiled. "You're quick, Mr. Rankin."

"Quick and certain," Lon said. "The answer is still no." He grinned. "However, you can tell your brother I'm mighty grateful for his sending you around." Mary Candola blushed. Through his own chuckle, Lon heard a sound back of the kitchen. He slid off his stool. "Excuse me, ma'am. The local dogs must be nosing around looking for scraps again."

"Mr. Rankin—" she stopped him with a slim hand on his arm—"I don't know whether you realize how much it would mean to Rich to have this location. Did he mention what his relationship with Jeff Willet was?"

Lon sat down again. "Yeah," he said, without thinking. "It's the kind of relationship that'll put one of them in a pine box."

HE STOPPED abruptly, not wanting to add that he figured it would be her brother Rich who would inherit the wooden jacket. Her brother was a new man, but Jeff Willet had been present at the birth of the town, and his bawdy Pearl Saloon wasn't half as mean and tough as Jeff himself.

Lon leaned closer. "Miss, there's already one saloon in town. Why not let well enough alone?"

The girl's eyes suddenly snapped and she set her cup down with a clatter. "My brother has just as much right as anyone else to start another place here, and no one—least of all Jeff Willet—is going to stop him."

Her full mouth trembled, and Lon thought, she made a mistake. She was supposed to sweet-talk me into selling, and she forgot. He nearly laughed aloud at the way the girl put her hand on his arm, and at the way her voice softened.

"But what are we fighting about?" she asked, smiling.

That was when Lon smelled the smoke. The faint sharpness touched his nostrils, and his first thought was that he'd left something burning on the stove in back. He grinned at the girl and slid off his stool.

"Excuse me. Must have left a steak on the stove."

Then another thought hit him like the kick of a mule. It couldn't be anything on the stove. He was closed for the night!

He heard the beat of horses, and another sound which chilled the skin at the back of his neck—the snapping of burning tumbleweed. Then he was running through the small kitchen and tearing open the back door. His eyes swung to the pile of brush against the back of the cafe, to the flames already caressing the flat, unpainted wooden boards. The brush was crackling with the ferocity of dry tinder, the sparks leaping up in a bright

shower. Someone had started to burn him out!

Swearing, he managed to pull some of the brush away. But the fire had a good start. It was roaring up the sides, devouring the wood hungrily. The girl appeared in the doorway, and suddenly the whole picture cleared.

He knew why she was here, and he knew who had been riding the horses and had fired his place. Rich Candola! And his sister was a decoy, to keep Lon busy!

She stood in the doorway now, her white hands clasped, her face touched with terror in the firelight. But she picked up her skirts and came to him. "I'll get help," she said.

Whirling, he caught her arm. "And run out? The devil you will. You've got yourself into this. Now you're going to see it out." He thrust a bucket into her hands and pointed to the well. "Fill it and bring it. Then fill it again."

He tore at the flaming tumbleweed with his hands so that he could get the water against the building. She looked at him, her dark eyes wide and puzzled. Then, without a word, she ran to the well.

By the time they got the fire out, half the back wall was gone. Lon stood looking at the smoking black wood, sweat running into his eyes and making a wet mass of his shirt. At last he turned to the girl. He looked at her straggly hair, at the tenseness of her mouth which had been so soft, and asked himself how anyone so pretty could be so low, so depraved. And with his regret came a flashing anger. He glared at her.

"Okay, you've made your try at the place," he grated. "But at least you helped undo what you started."

She stared at him. "What *I* started? What are you talking about?"

"You know as well as I do. I ought to turn you over to Sheriff Peet. You come here and sweet-talk me to keep me busy, while your brother fires up the back of my place."

"My brother?" Her voice rose sharply. "That's ridiculous!"

"Sure," Lon said sarcastically, "just as ridiculous as the play he's been making to buy my place, and the fact that he was sore when he left the last time, and the fact that you hung onto me like a bloodsucker to keep me from coming out here."

He saw the shocked anger on her face. There was a blurred arc of movement as her hand flashed up, then a sharp stinging on his face. She had slapped him.

"You hateful, stupid—"

She turned into a scratching, kicking wildcat. That slapping hand drew back and lashed at him again. He grabbed it and held on. She fought, trying to get away. She was such a mean, ornery little heifer there seemed to be only one thing to do. He pulled her to him and brought his lips down on her mouth. It turned out to be more of an event than he figured.

When he back away she stared at him, her eyes sparkling with quick tears, then fled around the side of the cafe. Lon stepped through the hole in his kitchen wall and watched through a window as she disappeared into the shadows beyond the moonlit street. Regret seized him. If she weren't Rich Candola's sister, and acting like it, he could sure get used to having her around.

He turned and surveyed the wet, charred remnants of the corner of his kitchen. "Rankin," he muttered unhappily, "this isn't your day."

IN THE morning he had made up his mind how to keep from being burned out again. He crossed the street to Jeff Willet's Pearl Saloon.

Willet's private kingdom extended beyond the Pearl. The saloon gave him a firm grip on the purses of most of the stage drivers, cowhands, drifters, and other habitual malcontents who found their way to town.

Behind the green swinging doors at the front, a tinny piano clanked constantly against a background of brawls and killings. The local Wells-Fargo agent spent considerable time in the Pearl, sorting out his drivers from the punchers who came in to unload a week's pay in one frantic night of drinking. Ranchers from the area spent considerable time there, sorting out their punchers from the Wells-Fargo drivers.

The agent and the ranchers, with their sodden charges in tow, met with dismal regularity at Lon Rankin's Cafe across the street, where

the coffee was strong enough and black enough to sober a man in minutes. But the punchers and drifters kept returning to the Pearl, and before long Jeff Willet was rich enough to assume the pose of local baron.

He took to wearing fancy vests and a gold watch chain, and trimmed the ends from expensive cigars with a jewelled pocket knife. Along with this dandifying process, his word somehow became unofficial law, with his gun hands to back it up.

This morning Willet lounged behind his large desk, his ice-blue eyes noncommittal as Lon outlined his idea. "So you want to scare Candola off with the help of a couple of my boys. Is that right, Rankin?"

Lon nodded. "I figure to fix it so Candola will pay me a visit again tonight. I don't want anyone hurt, but if your boys were to fire over the heads of Rich's men they might decide my little spot isn't worth all the trouble."

Jeff Willet scowled. "I hear you used to be a gun hand. How come you don't take care of this guy yourself?"

Lon shifted uncomfortably. He'd never mentioned his past to anyone around here. "I figure to leave, and that ought to decoy Candola."

"I see." Willet inspected his cigar. "What's in it for me?"

"If Candola forces me out he'll build a rival saloon there. The easiest way for you to beat him is to help me hold on." Lon felt his muscles tense as he leaned over Willet's desk. "I'm going to take care of myself, Jeff. But remember, I don't want to do it by killing. It's just that Candola might think twice about coming back if he knows I've got guns behind me."

Jeff Willet got up and sauntered to the window of his small office. Thoughtfully he exhaled a long jet of cigar smoke.

"All right." He turned, a gleam in his eyes, and gestured with the cigar. "I'll give you Mason and Price. They're good boys. But make sure Candola shows tonight, so we won't have to keep them there forever."

"He'll show," Lon said, grinning. "Thanks, Jeff."

Lon spent the day fixing his kitchen, in between attending to customers. Mason and Price arrived late in the afternoon. They were tall, with shifting eyes, and they had nothing to say. They lazed in the front part of the cafe, hovering like buzzards over carrion.

With a strange mixture of comfort and anxiety, Lon closed up after the evening meal, leaving the two gun hands sitting in the darkness. At his hotel room, which he'd rented earlier because his bunking spot in the kitchen had been burned out, he washed off the cafe smells and put on a clean shirt. He thought about Mary Candola. As a woman, with a woman's heart, she should be sympathetic to an apology about now. That would be his excuse to ride out to the Candola house, just past the far edge of town.

Once he arrived there, Rich could see with his own eyes that Lon wasn't at the cafe. He'd bet his last beefsteak Rich would try to fire his place again tonight.

LON rode through town on his brown mare. Cautiously he approached the Candola house, watching the lamplit windows and searching the shadows around the box-like frame building. He racked his horse, and his pulse jumped as he saw Mary Candola walk through one of the yellow squares of light at a window. Reaching down, Lon touched the spot around his leg that used to rub against a holster. Now, with no six-shooter, the spot seemed naked. But he'd foresworn the gun two years ago when he opened his cafe, and he intended to live by his new code if he could.

Mary Candola answered his knock. He saw her attractive face go white.

"I came out here to apologize, ma'am," he said, removing his hat. She stood looking at him for a long moment, her full lips parted in astonishment. Then she opened the door wide, without speaking.

Lon stepped in, looking around for Rich. But the room was empty except for the girl and himself. She closed the door and turned to him. Lon saw the suspicion in her face as he blurted out, "I didn't really have a good reason to accuse your brother of setting that fire. I was just mad and had to blame it on somebody. That's why I wanted to apologize."

She stood looking at him, her dark eyes

searching. He thought her face softened. "Maybe," he said, "you can think of some better reason for me to be here, Miss Candola. If you can, you've got a right not to believe me." He grinned. "Personally, I can only think of one other reason to come here."

Mary Candola's face pinkened, and Lon took a step toward her. "I figure we both know what that is."

"Well, hello!" Rich's voice came from behind them. He stood in the kitchen doorway, his heavy mouth wearing a forced smile. "Changed your mind about selling that beanery, Rankin?"

Lon grinned with an effort. "Don't reckon I have yet. A little fire isn't enough to put a man out of business."

Candola said, "Somebody's got it in for you, that's easy to see. Next time it might not be such a little fire."

"You figure there's going to be a next time?"

Candola shrugged.

"Well," Lon spread his hands in a gesture of indifference, "I have other things on my mind tonight." He smiled at Mary Candola. The girl dropped her eyes, and Lon thought, she's still playing the shy woman—probably wondering what damage she can do to me next. He said, "I figured Miss Mary might like me to repay her visit."

Rich grinned and said to his sister, "Mary, why don't you show him our album? There aren't many picture albums like it in this part of the country." Mary Candola nodded and left the room. Rich turned to Lon. "Reckon I'd better get along. Make yourself at home."

"Thanks," Lon said, and watched as Rich followed the girl. They're a pair of liars, he told himself silently. Half a minute in that other room is enough for him to tell her to keep me here for an hour or so. Make yourself at home, Rankin, while us Candolas fix you good.

With a dull inward feeling of satisfaction that his plan was working, Lon gave his attention to Mary Candola. They sat on the sofa, and in the soft glow of lamplight he studied her lovely face, animated as she told him the stories behind the pictures in the family album. The old tintypes reminded him of the time before the death of his parents, before the bitter loneliness filled his life like a poison and turned him into a gun-toting, hardened man. It was before the five years he'd wandered, at loose ends, trying to find the solution to the vague dreams lying under the surface of his mind. It was before the day he had ridden into Terrapin Fork and liked the bustling town and the vision of a new life.

NOW he sat with Mary Candola, her smooth features touched with soft shadows from the flickering lamp, and he realized with an almost overwhelming tug at his heart that she could have been part of that new life if only she hadn't been in on her brother's schemes.

Thinking about it, he reached out impulsively and covered her hand with his. She turned, a warmth in her eyes. For an instant he almost forgot their circumstances and his mission here. But the image of her brother came in front of him when he heard the faint, distant shots he'd been listening for. Rich would have made his visit to the cafe and found out that Lon had power behind him. The two of them would now be openly aligned against each other.

The girl gave no sign of having heard the shots. Her face, grave and warm, remained unchanged. But Lon knew that when Rich came home and told her what had happened, his future with her would be mighty uncertain—even if Lon's own suspicions about her were false.

He pulled his hand back, stood up. His job here was finished. Stiffly he walked across the room and picked up his hat. He would make the break now, and make it clean.

Her eyes showed bewilderment at the change that had come over him. She came to him, the top of her dark head just even with his eyes. "Where are you going?"

"I have to get back to the hotel," Lon said brusquely.

"That sounds so—so cold, and final."

Her relaxed softness, so different from the clawing wildcat he'd kissed last night, broke down his defenses. "I hope it isn't final," he said. He pulled her to him. Her lips were warm and yielding, and it was all he could do

to tear away from her, to turn and stalk out the door.

He heard her voice sounding gently behind him as he mounted his horse. "Goodnight, Lon."

He lifted a hand, then wheeled the horse down the road. He didn't bother to check at the cafe. He could well imagine what had taken place, and morning would be plenty of time for a report.

In his rented room he tossed on a lumpy bed and eventually went to sleep, a disturbing image of Mary Candola's face hanging in his mind.

He awoke slowly, with an uneasy feeling, early the next morning. The sun streamed into a bright square on the wall, and Mary Candola's face was still before him. But now it was no mere image. She stood at the foot of his bed, pointing a six-shooter smack between his eyes.

Her voice, tired and bitter, broke the silence. "Get up. You can catch up on your sleep in jail."

Lon blinked. "Jail?" He stared at the girl, seeing the white tenseness in her face. Abruptly wide awake, he clutched at the sheets. "What are you handing me?"

Her answering laugh was hysterical. "As if you didn't know!"

"But I *don't* know." Lon sat up straight and eyed the gun. "Put that canon away before someone gets hurt."

The girl waved the weapon. "You're going to get hurt, just the way you hurt Rich. Only, when you die, it will be legally. You don't deserve it, Lon Rankin. You deserve to go with a bullet in you, just the way you killed him."

Lon began to feel sick. He felt just the way he had time after time when he'd worked as a gun hand. He wet his lips. "Rich is dead?"

"Right where you shot him." She waved the six-shooter again. "Get out of bed, but don't try anything. I'm leaving the door open. Dress in the light from the window. I'll wait outside, and if your shadow does anything it shouldn't—" She backed into the hallway. Lon began dressing.

"Who told you I killed Rich?"

"Be quiet and get ready."

He put on his denim pants and shirt and bent over for his boots. Then he tried again. "Who found him?"

"Two of Willet's men." Mary Candola's voice said coldly. "It doesn't make any difference. Hurry up."

Willet's men. That would be Mason and Price, of course. They'd defied his orders and —a thought suddenly hit Lon. Maybe Mason and Price hadn't defied his orders as much as they had followed Willet's orders—to shoot Candola. If he were being accused of the murder, it added up that way. But why would Willet want to put him on the spot?

Dressed, Lon stepped into the open doorway. "Where are we going?"

"To the jail. It's the only place you'll be safe."

He stared at her. "Safe? But I thought you"

"There's a mob looking for you." She cut him off with a wave of the sixgun. "They didn't know where you were, so I told them you'd headed for the hills. They'll be back soon." Lon scratched his ear.

"But why are you doing this?"

Mary Candola stamped her foot. "I did it because even the man who killed my brother gets a fair trial, if I have anything to do with it," she said heatedly. "Rich was no saint." She levelled the revolver. "March!"

TURNING, Lon marched. He felt almost like grinning. She was some woman! A dozen small things popped into his mind as they walked down to the street—the way she had acted at the fire, the bewilderment in her eyes last night when he was leaving. He halted as a thought struck him, and went on when the six-shooter prodded him in the back. Mary Candola didn't know what her brother was up to! If she did she'd have tried to keep him with her longer last night, so Rich would have had time to reduce his cafe to cinders. She actually didn't know what Candola was doing!

Lon started to speak, but they had arrived at the squat two-cell jail. Ben Peet, the town's white-haired, ineffectual old sheriff, waited in the doorway. He nodded to Mary Candola and fastened suspicious eyes on Lon.

"Reckon you're in trouble, lad."

"Reckon I am," Lon said. He looked at the girl, wishing there were some way he could make her see what had really happened. "I guess no one would believe me if I say I had nothing to do with it."

Peet waved him inside the jail. "There's a slim chance you'll get to say your piece for a jury. But for now you'd better hole up in Cell One. This isn't going to be a church social."

The sheriff and the girl waited in the office, with Lon locked in the front cell. As the news spread, everyone in town turned out. The posse returned, an ill-tempered, dusty group of men. The crowd in the street became a mob, with death on its mind.

Looking out the small window, Lon could see Jeff Willet whipping the mob to a frenzy. With the vividness born of desperation, it came to Lon. Willet didn't want the cafe around either. Too many men left the Pearl Saloon before they'd spent all their money. Too many had gotten the habit of tapering off on coffee instead of rye whisky. Now, with Candola out of the way, and Lon as a made-to-order murderer, it would be easy for Willet to remove the final small thorn in his side—the cafe. In one sweep he could eliminate both Candola and Lon as threats to his domain.

Suddenly Lon grabbed the bars. "Ben, what time was Rich shot?"

Lon was aware of the girl's quick movement and the blanching of her face. Peet shrugged.

"Doc said he'd been dead three hours when Willet's men found him. That'd make the shooting around nine or so."

"Nine!" Lon looked at Mary. "At nine o'clock we were—"

The girl's eyes, framed in confusion and showing the emotional strain of the night she'd been through, turned to the sheriff and then back to Lon. "He was with me then. He couldn't have shot Rich."

Peet's eyes were regretful. "I can't let you out even if I wanted to. Take a look out the window."

Lon stared through the cell window. The mob had surrounded the jail. And, with Willet there, it didn't want explanations—it wanted a victim.

"You said you knew who really killed Rich," the girl said.

"It was Willet's henchmen." Lon took a deep breath, then told his story. "Rich was actually the one who set the fire. He didn't tell you about it, and he didn't tell you where he was going when he left us alone last night. But I came out there because I knew that the minute he suspected my place was unguarded he'd try firing it again. I'd borrowed two of Willet's boys and told them to scare the daylights out of Rich if he tried anything. But I also told them not to hurt him. Willet must have ordered them to gun down Rich, then blame it on me. I've been taking business away from him. This way he's getting rid of both of us at once, and covering his tracks to boot."

He could see that the girl was having a hard time accepting her brother's guilt. But after a moment she nodded miserably. "Rich hated Willet. He'd have done almost anything to get rid of him—without risking his own neck, of course." Her chin came up and she looked into Lon's eyes. Then, suddenly, she turned and snatched Peet's key ring.

"Hey!" The sheriff's white brows shot up. "You can't do that."

But Mary Candola had her sixgun levelled at him. "Sheriff," she announced grimly, "someone's got to do something. If you won't, I will."

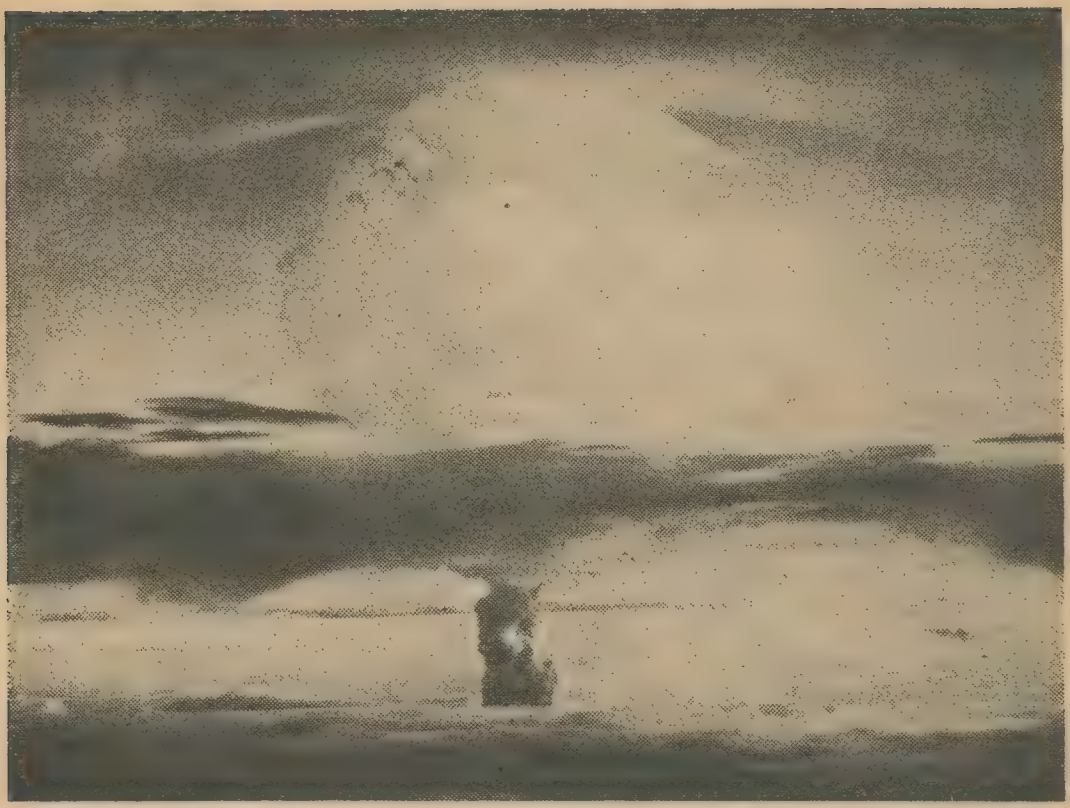
She unlocked Lon's cell and waved him out. "Walk in front, Lon. Go outside."

Lon swallowed. The minute they got out that door the mob would have him. Willet would never let them listen to explanations. He gulped, then opened the door and stepped into the bright sunlight.

SHOUTS rose from the mob, and he looked into the face of hatred and death. Suddenly he was deafened by a shot near his ear. Mary Candola's gun was smoking, her eyes were challenging the mob. A shout went up again as the men brandished sticks and guns. Mary Candola let another round out of her sixgun. Mob or no mob, a female and a gun made a dangerous combination. The crowd quieted.

"I don't want to hang this hombre," Mary

[*Turn to Page 94*]



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Candola said clearly. "I want to marry him."

Lon stared dizzily at her, hardly hearing the astonished buzz that went up from the crowd, realizing that nothing Willet could do would check their surprise. The girl held up her hand.

"Lon Rankin couldn't have shot Rich," she said, "because he was with me at the time. He was with me for a long time after Rich was killed." The girl, face flaming, turned to Lon.

He looked deep into her eyes and saw what she was doing. She was compromising herself, knowing this town would forget an ordinary, plain old hanging if it had a juicy scandal instead. The buzz started up again. Already some of the men were grinning lewdly.

Someone shouted, "Who *did* kill Rich then?"

Lon pointed at Mason and Price, who were lounging against a hitching rack across the street. "They did—at Jeff Willet's orders."

Mason and Price stood, indolent and mocking, as the crowd turned. It could have been only curiosity, only the shuffling of feet that made the crowd seem to move toward the pair, yet something in the motioned panicked the man called Price, and he backed toward his horse at the hitching rail and groped out his gun. Mason, betrayed by the motion, shrugged and thumbed back the hammer of his own weapon. The pair mounted, wheeled and vanished amid the mutters of the crowd. The faces then turned toward Willett.

Willett stood still, his face frozen by the sudden and revealing departure of his henchmen. His voice sounded angrily through the silence. "Get that girl's gun and step into the street, Rankin. Maybe my boys shot Candola, but that doesn't mean I ordered it. You're going to have to prove it with lead."

For a moment Lon stood unmoving, feeling the tenseness, wondering why Willet was challenging him. Willet knew he could handle a gun. But then Lon remembered that, in this town, a coward was almost worse than a killer. Besides, Willet's stake here was too big for him to move on.

Lon took Mary Candola's gun from her cold hands, grinning to quiet the stark fear in her eyes. Then the mob parted and he faced Willet, who waited tense and ready.

Lon went forward, a tightness in his throat. It had been three years since he'd had to kill a man, and now, with the citizens of his home town looking on, he'd have to go back to the old ways—or die.

He saw the blurred movement of Willet's hand, the flash of sunlight on steel. As he squeezed the trigger he heard the roar of the other man's gun, and felt invisible fingers pluck at his sleeve. Mary Candola's gun bucked in his hand, and Willet's body held motionless for a moment before starting its slow sag to the gray dust of the street.

With the familiar, leaden weight of the past over his heart, Lon straightened his shoulders. The sudden shout of the crowd was a distant thing in his ears. The only reality was the hard feel of the smoking gun in his hand, the acrid bite of powder cutting his nostrils, and, fifty feet away, the man who was no longer a man.

He turned away, regretting that, no matter what a man's business, he couldn't escape a fight now and then. But Mary Candola's hand on his arm roused him, and he thought that maybe his next fight would be a long way off.

He looked at the girl and saw that the fear was gone from her eyes, leaving only calmness and strength.

"It's over, Lon," she said. "Will you take me home?"

"It's not over," he said roughly. "There's a posse to get out after Mason and Price. And—" his hand closed on her forearm—"you've left yourself open to every scandalous tongue in this town."

Her eyes were level. "Does it matter, Lon?"

"Matter!" He was suddenly aware how much it mattered, and that his hands were painfully tight on her arm.

"Well then—" the calmness left her eyes and a wicked sparkle twinkled up at him—"I guess the only thing you can do is make an honest woman of me."

Lon could stand only so much. He grabbed her and kissed her.

In some ways, it was a bigger event than breaking out of jail.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

NOW IT can be told—with no ifs or buts—just who won the Rodeo Cowboys' Association Championships for 1954.

We're happy to report that our guess a couple of months back turned out to be correct. Buck Rutherford is the winner of the All-Around Championship, but he wasn't exactly a shoo-in as we predicted. He won by only 440 points over Jim Shoulders, a pretty narrow margin. Buck's score was 40,404 (each point representing a dollar won) and Jim's was 39,964. In third place is Casey Tibbs with 36,553.

Only one race besides the All Around was close at all, and that was a *real* squeaker. Eddy Akridge won the bareback, just seven points ahead of Buck Rutherford—14,983 to 14,976. And Buck needn't demand a recount, because those scores have been recounted, by just about every RCA official and employee who could operate an adding machine or lick a pencil. Buck, of course, wouldn't dream of questioning Eddie's victory. Being All-Around Champion is honor enough for a modest, unassuming cowboy like he is.

Casey Tibbs, as usual, ran off with the saddle bronc championship, 23,052 points to Deb Copenhaver's 20,836. There just isn't much argument about it—Casey can ride broncs better than anyone most of the time. He has been champion in this event for four years now, starting in 1949 and skipping only in 1950, when he was out of competition for two months with injuries.

Likewise, there's not much argument about who the best calf-roper is these days, or should we say, these years? Don McLaughlin has won the title for the last four years, and his margin of victory gets wider every time. Maybe the other calf-ropers are getting too discouraged to put up a fight. When Don first won the championship in 1950, it was by a few hundred points, and his victory was clinched in a hotly-contested finale at Madison Square Garden. This year, no one could have overtaken Don since last July, when he was leading by 7,000 points. He went galloping along at the same pace for the rest of the year, and ended up with a grand total of 23,048 to Buddy Groff's 11,366.

It was the same story—or even more so—in bull riding. Jim Shoulders had no serious competition from the minute he started in Denver last January, and he ended up with 28,700 points against Billy Hand's 15,185. Jim may be the better bull-rider, but Billy has a special distinction. He's the only non-Western cowboy to win one of the top five places in any of the seven recognized rodeo events. Billy does come from cattle country, however, in Florida if not in the West.

In steer wrestling, also known as bulldogging, James Bynum racked up 12,578 to 10,168 for Joe Madden. James has been working his way up in the standings since 1950, when he hit fourth place. Last year he started with a bang, dogging his first steer in 4.5 seconds, which should have served fair notice that he meant business in '54.

The other two events produce much lower scores, since they are less commonly scheduled. They're just as hotly contested, though. In team roping the victor was Eddie Schell, 6,547 to 6,197 for Dale Smith. Eddie and Dale weren't really bitter rivals most of the year. In fact, they both won most of their points while roping together as a team. In steer-roping Shoat Webster ran off with the marbles, his total being 4,189 to Clark McEntire's 3,582.

So that's it, rodeo fans, for 1954. Now it's time to sharpen your pencils and start adding up scores for 1955.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

The Fighting Texan

By Will Cook

A man by the bunkhouse yelled and light spilled from the doorway

THE STORY SO FAR: Marshal JIM QUARTERMAIN backs out on a showdown with badman KURT HARLOW when he gets a summons from his foster father, IZEE BEAL, in Texas. Izee had tangled with the JENNERS over his plan to fence his range. He was shot and is dying, and his daughter JANE has been summoned from school to take over half of Izee's ranch. Jim gets the other half.

Jim meets the Jenners to talk things over, but the meeting ends in a fight with old ROB JENNER, while his sons BUSHROD, PARKER, and FORNEY stand by. CARRIE HOLDERMAN, who loves Jim, follows him to Texas, and her appearance stops the fight. Jim admits that his old love for Jane Beal still stands between him and Carrie.

Banker HORACE PENDERGAST convinces the Jenners they need gunfighters to stop Jim from fencing the ranch. Meanwhile Jim starts the fencing, prepared to fight. . . .

PART TWO

JIM QUARTERMAIN was up and dressed before the dawn light sneaked into his room. He had exchanged his suit for faded levis and blue shirt, a rag-tag cowhide vest and a pair of elkhide shotgun breeches.

He was not wearing his gun when he sat down at the cookshack table. Nine pair of eyes looked up to give him a quick glance.

Other than Purvis and Cimarron, there were no familiar faces here. But this did not surprise him, for the West was full of drifters, men who worked a season and rode away. He made it a point to finish his meal first, and then stood up. The others were taking their time, purposely stalling to see what he would do.

Jim Quartermain touched Cimarron on the shoulder and said, "Get them outside and ready for work in five minutes."

"You get 'em out," Cimarron said. "They're still eating."

Quartermain looked around the table and found them watching him, a vague amusement in their eyes. Suddenly he reached for the edge of the table and upended it with a jarring crash. Food and dishes scattered on the floor and in laps. Men cursed and fought to get away from this tipping mess.

When they were all standing Quartermain said, "You're through eating now. I can take you on one at a time and whip you, but you look smarter than that. Five minutes, I said —and if I were you I wouldn't be late."

This was a bad moment, and he knew it. He was asking for trouble and, if they all jumped him at once, neither Purvis nor Cimarron would come to his rescue.

The men measured him, then one man grinned and said, "I was full anyhow," and walked out.

The others followed him to the corral, where they cut out horses. Purvis sighed like a man relieved from a terrible strain, and Cimarron shook his head, silently respectful.

"I would never have done that," Cimarron said. "There are some tough men working here."

"The tougher the better," Quartermain said, and went back to the house.

Exactly five minutes later they were assembled outside, in the first pink rays of the sun. The wire wagon came up and the crew sat their horses, waiting. With a nod, Quartermain and Cimarron led them out, while Gil Purvis brought up the rear.

Through the day Quartermain drove the crew hard, and the strands of new wire glistened like silver thread in the sunlight. The heat mounted, and sweat-stained horses and men raised thick, choking dust around them. At sundown Quartermain left two men behind to split the guard shift.

Riding back to the ranch, Cimarron complained of this. "You can't push men hard all day like this and then expect 'em to stand guard half the night."

Quartermain regarded Cimarron closely for a moment. "Would you rather have the wire cut during the night and have to string it all over again tomorrow?"

"Forget I mentioned it," Cimarron said, and spurred his horse on ahead. Purvis dropped back and rode beside Quartermain.

"Perky gent, isn't he?"

"He's tired."

"We're all tired, but we aren't discontented. He is."

"You never liked him, did you?" Quartermain looked at his friend.

"Can't rightly say's I ever did," Purvis admitted. "Course, he's never done me any harm, either."

"Keep off his back," Quartermain warned. "Cimarron's tough."

Purvis laughed softly. "Well now, I've done a little squinting at the elephant myself."

"Difference there," Quartermain said, "is that Cimarron squints over a gun barrel."

AT THE ranch Quartermain turned his horse out and washed at the well, before going into the house. He heard Carrie in the kitchen, but went to the parlor instead. Izee's desk sat in the corner, and Quartermain rolled back the top and pulled out the records that told the life-and-death story of a ranch in columns of figures.

For nearly an hour he added and balanced on an old piece of wrapping paper. Then he heard Carrie's footsteps in the hall. She came in and sat on the edge of the desk. She wore a print dress with full sleeves, and he could see the outline of her legs beneath the cloth.

"Did you have to leave like that this morning?" she asked.

He glanced at her and then stroked his mustache with his forefinger. "You ought to wear more petticoats," he said.

She laughed softly and smoothed her dress over her legs. "Too hot. I won't stand with the sun behind me, if that's what's worrying you."

He smiled and threw the pencil stub aside. She could find him during a most troubled state of mind and raise him out of it without effort. This was her gift, a natural optomism that affected him strongly. Almost everything in life pleased her, gave her happiness, and she transferred it to him.

"Carrie," he said seriously, "put a lock on your door.'

"Do I need one, Jim?"

"I don't know. But the moment you'd find out whether you did or not, it would be too late."

She put her palm against his cheek and scraped his whiskers. "You need a shave. Do you know that for the first time in over two years I slept without hearing a gun go off? You don't know how nice that was."

"Guns can go off here too."

"It would be different here," she told him and cupped his face briefly in her palm for a kiss. Afterward she said, "I baked you a peach pie."

"You campaigning, Carrie?"

She shook her head. "I don't campaign, Jim. You know what I am. A year, a day, wouldn't change anything."

She slid off the desk and went back to the kitchen. He listened to the small sounds she made, the rattle of a pan, the shuffle of the stove grates. Then he went back to his books.

It was after nine when he finished. Carrie had brought him a wedge of pie, and this was his supper. Quartermain was not thinking of food when he closed the desk and walked across the yard to the bunkhouse. He opened the door and looked around. Purvis was on his bunk reading a yellow-back novel.

Quartermain touched one of the Running W riders and said, "Were you on the roundup when Izee sold off the longhorns?"

"Sure," the man said, and snubbed out his cigaret. "All of us were."

The men in the bunkhouse listened carefully. Only Gil Purvis went on reading, his lips moving slowly as he spelled out the words.

"Who ramrodded it?"

"Cherokee was boss," the man said. "Cimarron handled the beef sale in Abilene, while the old man and Cherokee took the train east after shorthorns."

"Where's Cimarron now?"

"Don't know. He comes and goes pretty much to suit himself."

"I heard him ride out an hour ago," Purvis said, not taking his eyes from the page.

"Thanks," Quartermain said, and went back to the house. Carrie Holderman was on the porch, and she followed him inside.

"I heard you slam out. What's the matter, Jim?"

"Nothing," he said shortly, then stopped and took her arm, speaking more gently. "Nothing, Carrie. Don't worry about me. I'll be back by morning."

"Morning? But where—"

"I don't know where," Quartermain said. "If Cimarron comes back before I do, tell Purvis quietly that I want him to hang around until I get back."

"All right," Carrie said, and Quartermain went to his room for his gun.

GIL PURVIS was by the corral, and he had Quartermain's horse saddled. Quartermain said, "You read minds?"

"Wasn't hard to figure out," Purvis said. "You read something in the books you didn't like. Fellow does that now and then. You might say that there was a slip of the pencil. Makes life real complicated for a man if he doesn't watch himself."

"You through with the homespun philosophy?"

Quartermain mounted and left the yard, riding toward the section of fence that the crew had completed that day. While he rode through the darkness, Quartermain went over in his mind the small errors that had finally stood out so glaringly. He had recognized Izee Beal's writing and Cherokee's almost illegible scrawl, but here and there erasures had been made and the totals doctored. Since Cimarron was in some position of authority

on Running W, Quartermain selected him as the man to supply the answers.

At the fence line a guard challenged him, then let him through. He dismounted and squatted by the bedrolls. One man was in his blankets, and he propped himself up on one elbow.

"Either of you see Cimarron tonight?"

"He left here twenty minutes ago," one man said.

"Which way?"

The man pointed to a low rise of hills that fell off to the river land. Quartermain went to his horse and mounted, moving off into the night. Settling himself to a steady pace, he entered the first slope of the hills an hour later. He rode more alertly now, for the land was growing rough and he could easily overtake Cimarron, a thing that might prove dangerous.

He was certain that he had not lost the man, for he could still smell dust strongly in the still night air, a sure sign that a rider moved on ahead. But, once in the hills, the trail began to work through wooded land and smell of dust petered out.

For an hour Quartermain trailed by guess and by instinct, then broke out on a narrow winding path that led over a ridge and into a short valley. Midnight found him traversing a swale that let down into a clearing and where he could see a nester's cabin in a wooded hollow.

There was a bright light shining through the window, and Jim Quartermain tied his horse in the timber and went on afoot. He made a circuit of the place and came up by way of the outbuildings. He paused by a three-sided horse barn, and smiled when he found Cimarron's horse.

Waiting, Quartermain hunkered down against some stacked hay and let the minutes drag into an hour. Finally the cabin door opened and he could see the outflung bar of light. Leaving his hiding place, he skirted around on the other side.

Flattened against the wall, he heard Cimarron's low murmur and a woman's answering laugh. Then Cimarron went around the other side and got his horse from the lean-to. The woman stood in the doorway looking toward the rise of hills, before turning to go back inside. Quartermain moved quickly and caught the door just as it was about ready to close. The woman opened her mouth to cry out and he shoved her, sending her stumbling backward into the cabin. He closed the door, slid the bar, and leaned against it.

The woman recovered quickly from her fright and smiled, a mechanical forced smile calculated to lure men. She was young, in her mid-twenties. Once she had been pretty, but that had faded, leaving her skin too pale, her cheekbones two ridges that made hollows of her cheeks.

SHE wore a thin dress and nothing beneath it. She coughed, and her breasts were moving pendants beneath the cloth. "Care for a cup of coffee, honey?"

"No," Quartermain said, and watched her turn toward the stove. He had seen her kind before in a hundred isolated places, living alone and making out the best she could. "What's your name?"

"Call me Trixie." She laughed. "What's in a name?"

"Mine's Quartermain. You got a title for this place?"

"Title?" She poured a cup of coffee and sat down at the table. Her legs were thin and her hipbones sharp. "You own this, I guess. Sure, I got it. You just can't stand to see anyone make an honest dollar."

"What was Cimarron doing here tonight?"

"He got lonesome."

Quartermain turned to the door and slid the bolt aside. "You've got a week to clear out, Trixie."

She knocked over her coffee cup on her haste to follow him outside. Catching up with him, she grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute! Can't we talk this over?"

"Talk what over?"

Trixie said, "Big man pushing everybody around." She jabbed him in the chest with her finger. "Listen, big man, Running W built this place for me—labor, love and money. What do you say to that?"

"I've already said it; one week."

"Well, big man, just wait a week and see.

There are people around here who can pare you down to size. Get pushy tnd you'll—"

She stopped talking suddenly and whipped her glance toward the dark valley leading into the clearing. From a distance, the drum of a running horse was clear in the silence. Almost violently she began to push at Quartermain.

"Get out of here! Please! Go now, and hurry."

"Can't I meet your friend?"

"No! There'll be trouble! He's jealous." Quartermain avoided the light shafting from the partially-opened door, and stepped toward the corner of the cabin. The rider was no more than a quarter of a mile away, and coming on fast.

"I'll be back in a week," he said, and ran toward the lean-to.

Circling the shed, he entered the timber and began to race toward a position that afforded him a clear view of the cabin. He clung to the inky blackness of the trees and watched Parker Jenner dismount and step into the lighted doorway. Trixie reached past him and pulled the door closed, while Quartermain went up the hill for his horse.

PARKER JENNER helped himself to the coffee and sat down at the table. His face was bruised from the belting his father had given him, but his eyes still contained a bold swagger.

"Quartermain just left here," Trixie said, and smiled when Parker spilled some of his coffee.

"Just now?"

"Two jumps ahead of you. He wanted Cimarron. He suspects something." She moved to the back of Parker's chair and ran her fingers through his thick hair. "You don't come around and see me any more, Parker. I miss you."

"Cut it out," he said, and moved his head aside so that her hand fell away. "What did Cimarron have to say?"

"A section of the fence is up. There are two men guarding it."

"Then it'll be easy," Parker said, and stood up. He turned to the stove and, instead of moving around her, bumped her in the chest with his shoulder.

"Quartermain gave me a week to get out," she said. "Don't you care?"

"Why should I?" He lifted the pot, shook it, then threw it on the floor. Coffee spread in a wide stain, and the lid rolled beneath her brass bed. "Hell, you can't even make good coffee!"

She bit her lip and watched him. "Why do you do this to me?"

"Do what?" He watched her carefully.

"Treat me like dirt."

He laughed. "Well, what are you?"

"I was good enough for you before you began to hang around McKitrich's wife! What do you think'll happen when he finds out?"

"Shut your mouth!" he snapped, his eyes slightly wild.

"Yeah, shut up," she repeated, and sat down by the table, running her fingers through her hair. "When I was a little girl I used to think of a home all my own and a man and kids. That seems a long time ago."

"For you it was."

She raised her eyes to him. "You like to hurt me, don't you? Is it because I'm weak and dumb and you despise that in any woman? I suppose you would, because you're that way yourself. You'd want a strong woman, but none would have you. You have McKitrich's wife fooled, Parker, but she'll get ashamed one of these days, and then you'll come back here."

He smiled wryly and stepped toward her, grabbing her hair. He pulled her head back sharply and cocked his fist. His grip brought tears to her eyes, but she regarded him with a calm fatalism.

"I could make this skinny face so funny no man would want you. Want me to do it?"

"I don't care," she said. "I don't care about anything."

Had she raised her voice or showed fear, his temper would have unleashed itself. But her coolness kicked the props from under his pride. She admitted her weakness and gained strength by it, while he gained nothing. He released her hair and turned to the door.

"I'll see what Pendergast knows about Quartermain's threat."

He went outside and mounted his horse,

and Trixie listened to him leave. She got down on her hands and knees then and picked up the lid for the coffee pot. The coffee had soaked into the wood, leaving a dark stain, and she looked at this untidy spot as though it symbolized some deep smear on her soul.

By her bed she undressed and let the clothes fall in a limp heap at her feet. Then she turned her eyes to the mirror and regarded herself. Her image returned to her, gaunt, bony, the flesh no longer firm in the bloom of youth.

Aloud she said, almost in anguish. "I *am* young!"

Her voice was an alien sound in the empty room, and she pressed her hands over her eyes to close out the mirror.

JUST before eleven, Cherokee Nye wheeled into the yard with the buggy, and then dismounted to hand Jane Beal to the ground. The foreman bundled her luggage under his arms and in each hand, and followed her up the porch steps. There was a lamp lighted in the parlor and Jane paused in the arch, her head cocked to one side. Carrie Holderman lay on the horsehair sofa, one arm tucked beneath her head, sound asleep.

Jane stripped off her gloves and hat and walked softly into the room to stand near Carrie, looking down at her. Jane was not tall, but her body was full and designed to catch a man's eye. Her hair was a reddish blond, worn in a bun on the back of her head. Her eyes were veiled by long lashes and, in the lamplight, were almost green.

She looked Carrie over from head to foot, then said, "Whoever she belongs to has good taste."

Cherokee reddened and shifted his feet, and Carrie came awake. She rubbed her eyes and sat up, looking at Jane Beal. "I'm sorry," she said. "I must have fallen asleep. You're Jane, aren't you?"

"I know who I am," Jane said. "Who're you, the housekeeper?"

Cherokee said hurriedly, "She wasn't here when I left."

Carrie stood up and smoothed her dress. "I'm Jim Quartermain's guest, Carrie Holderman. I've been looking forward to meeting you, Jane."

"Have you?" Jane's eyebrow ascended slightly and she turned away. "Put my luggage away, Cherokee. I'll stay here and chat with Jim's, ah, guest." Cherokee hefted the bags and hurried out. Jane Beal walked around the room, touching the backs of chairs. Finally she whirled with a lifting of skirts, and met Carrie's eyes with a frank displeasure. "Where is Jim now?"

"Out. He left around nine and said he's be back by morning."

"I see. And how long do you plan to stay, Miss Holderman?"

"Permanently," Carrie said, and watched surprise break the mask of Jane's beauty.

Jane smiled sweetly. "But that's such a long time, darling. Don't you think it's going to get a little crowded?"

"I don't think so," Carrie said. "If Jim leaves, of course I'll go with him." She sat down again and folded her hands demurely in her lap. She regarded Jane frankly, then smiled. "You're just like he described you, except perhaps—older."

"Jim was never practical when it came to women. He was easily misled."

"He told me that you discovered that at an early age," Carrie said.

"Really! I—" Jane kicked her anger in place. "I'm very tired. Perhaps we can discuss this tomorrow when we both feel better." She gathered her hat and gloves and moved to the hallway, pausing there to look back at Carrie. "We're not going to like each other at all, are we?"

"Did you think we would?" Carrie asked, then smiled when Jane went down the lamplit hall with a swirl of skirts.

"Damn," Carrie said to herself, "but she's beautiful." She suddenly felt exhausted and lay down again. When Cherokee came through the house a moment later, she was apparently asleep.

QUARTERMAIN returned to his ranch at daybreak. After turning out his horse, he walked across the dry and caked yard to the house. The dawn was rinsing the darkness away, and the outline

of the land in the distance became clearer. He felt dirty and tired and the whiskers on his face were a half inch long, matted with sweat and dust.

Cherokee Nye came in and Quartermain gave him the work assignment for the day, then went into the kitchen when the foreman went out. Daylight was growing more full now and Quartermain stoked the kitchen fire and put on a pot of water for the coffee. He heard the soft sounds of movement in other parts of the house and a few minutes later Carrie Holderman came in, her hair in braids and a dark blue robe pulled tight around her.

"Get through skylarking?"

"A very interesting ride," Quartermain said. "You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

Another door opened and closed and he glanced at Carrie as footsteps padded down the hall. Carrie's face settled into inexpressiveness, and she moved past him to tend the coffee pot. She kept her back to the kitchen door as Jane Beal came in.

Jane made a dramatic pause in the doorway, standing with one arm raised to show advantageously the rounded lines of her body. Her eyes were too large for her face, but they gave her a completely innocent expression that contradicted the mature set of her lips.

Approaching Jim Quartermain, she managed a breathless expression. "No hello, no nothing, Jim?" Her glance moved to Carrie and she laughed, a rippling of soft rising notes. "Forgive me, darling, but I thought she was the housekeeper."

Quartermain resented this sly insult to Carrie. He said, "You always did make a lot of mistakes, Jane."

Her eyebrow came up and her smile deepened. "Oh? Then I'll take a chance on making another." She brought her arms up and around his neck and pressed herself against him, her lips against his. Quartermain stood unmoving for a moment, then placed his hands on her waist, pushing her gently away. Her laughter teased him. "Why, Jim, I think company makes you bashful!"

He sat down at the table and Jane glanced at Carrie. "Can't you hurry the coffee?"

Carrie pressed her lips tightly together, slammed the coffee pot once, and walked out of the kitchen, her slippers swishing on the floor. Quartermain stood up as if to follow her, but Jane pressed him back.

"Let her go, Jim. She doesn't belong here anyway."

"She belongs because I want her to belong," Quartermain said. "You haven't changed. That school you went to only sharpened your claws. But don't fasten your hooks in me or Carrie. If there's any taking to be done around here I'll do it. You understand?"

"I suppose it makes you feel big," she said, and cupped her hands around his. "Jim, I thought about you. When I got Cherokee's wire, I came back because I'd find you here. I want it to be just like it used to be." She paused and gave him an intimate smile. "Will she be so hard to get rid of?"

For a moment her boldness shocked him. Then he said, "Jane, are you after me?"

"Why not? We could rule the San Saba, Jim."

The coffee boiled over, giving him an excuse to get up. He poured a cup and brought it back to the table, sitting hunched over. Jane moved behind him and rubbed her cheek against his unshaven face.

"Get some rest," she said softly, her breath warm on his cheek. "We have a lot to talk about."

He did not answer her, and she went down the hall to her room. After he finished his coffee he debated whether to sleep or go out to the fence. After washing his face in the sink, he went to the corral and roped a horse.

An hour later he was at the fence, and he spent the remainder of the morning supervising the stringing of wire. At noon he took his meal with the crew, then lay in the shade of the chuckwagon and slept for three hours. Just before sunset he detailed another man to stay behind, and followed the crew home.

At the barn he drew Cherokee aside and said, "Purvis goes in Cimarron's place."

"You sure you want it that way?"

"The way I say it is the way I want it," he said, and walked to the house. Jane was in the parlor and she gave him a warm smile, but he went into the kitchen. Carrie was working over the stove. Quartermain blew

hair away from her neck and kissed her.

"Still mad?" he asked.

"Hurt," she admitted. "The day hasn't been fun. Princess likes to sit on her dignity and give orders."

"Tell her to go jump," he said, and lathered his face at the sink. He stropped the razor and removed his whiskers. He was drying his face when Jane came in and sat down at the table.

"Jim, I'd like to go into town to check our bank statement with Pendergast."

"All right," he said. "I'll have Cherokee run you in in the morning."

"I want you to come with me," she said, shooting a glance at Carrie. "Darling, I know so little about money manners and we're partners, aren't we?"

"Yes. I'll go if I'm not busy."

"Just don't be busy," she said, and walked down the hall. She paused halfway down and turned back. "Carrie, when will supper be ready?" Then she laughed and went into the parlor.

QUARTERMAIN glanced at Carrie, then took her by the shoulders and pulled her away from the stove. He untied her apron and threw it on the back of a chair.

"Let's take a walk."

"The dinner'll burn!"

"Then let it burn," he said, and guided her out the back door and around the side of the house. "I've lived with Jane and I know how to handle her. Just forget it."

They walked slowly past the barn and the corral. From across the flats the smell of hot earth blended with the nitrogen of horses. The night was deep and a cool breeze was making up. Quartermain and Carrie stopped by the fence that marked the back pasture. Herefords moved around in the darkness, vague brown and white shapes.

Quartermain leaned against a fence post and licked a cigar into shape before arcing a match. He smoked in silence, then flipped his head up when he heard the dull pop floating across the distance.

There was another and he threw his cigar down.

"The Jenners are hitting the fence!"

He left Carrie, racing for the bunkhouse, but she hoisted her skirts and ran after him. Some of the crew had been outside and were running toward the corral.

Purvis ran past, shouting, "I'll saddle for you, Jim!"

Quartermain went into the house for his gun. When he came out he found Carrie standing in the dusty yard. Jane called to him from the porch, but he ignored her.

Carrie said, "Now it's guns again."

"Go back to the house," he said. "I'll wake you when I get back."

"I won't sleep until you do," she said, and took his arm. "Jim, about Jane—she excites you, doesn't she? All fire and fight; you like that in a woman, don't you?"

"Yes, I like it, but liking it isn't love."

"I suppose not," she said, "but that doesn't mean you love me either, does it?" She did not wait for his answer, but ran to the house as though she had already guessed and could not bear to hear him say it.

Purvis came up with a horse and Quartermain mounted, leading the crew from the yard at a run. They pounded across the flats, but the smattering of shooting had died off by the time they arrived at the fence line. A fire had been started and the men dismounted to cluster around it.

"Anybody hurt?" was Quartermain's first question upon dismounting.

"Bullet shattered my rifle stock," one man said. He came from the surrounding darkness, the broken gun in his hands. "Jenner's bunch. It was dark and I didn't see anyone close, but I'd know Parker's squeaky voice anyplace."

Purvis had gone down the line to check the fence and he came back. "None of the wire's been cut. Seems there was a lot of shooting for nobody getting hit."

The fact puzzled Quartermain too and he said, "Cherokee, take the crew back. I'm going to see Rob and I'll bed down here when I get back."

"That's a fool stunt," Purvis said.

"I'll be safe enough," Quartermain said. "Seems that this was a warning on Rob's part. Now I got to show him he didn't scare us."

He went to his horse and mounted, riding off immediately. He followed the fence for nearly a mile and then cut through where it ended. An hour later he found the road leading to Long Knife.

In the distance he could hear the rattle of a buggy and pulled off the road. The night was dark, but he could see for twenty yards and he waited until the rig loomed toward him. The driver saw Quartermain then and lashed the team into frenzied run. Surprised, Quartermain shouted and half blocked the road, but the buggy swerved and the driver lashed out with his whip, caught Quartermain's horse across the rump, and started it bucking.

THERE was no chance of pursuit, for the horse pitched wildly and Quartermain was busy fighting the animal. When he checked the horse and looked down the road, there was nothing but the thick odor of dust remaining.

He turned and went on toward Rob Jenner's place.

Light streaked from the windows like beacons and Quartermain rode boldy to the porch and dismounted. A man hidden in shadow said, "There's a rifle on you."

Quartermain recognized Audie the Kid, and stepped onto the porch as Rob Jenner came out. Jenner said, "You want trouble, Jim?"

"Talk," Quartermain said.

Jenner grunted. "Take your gun off this man if he comes in peace."

He turned and went back inside, Quartermain following him. Audie the Kid came in and leaned against the wall, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

From the parlor, Rob Jenner said, "In here," and Quartermain stepped to the door. He stopped there, his eyes going immediately to the man across the room.

Kurt Harlow said, "Jim, friend, it's good to see you again."

Gone were the man's fine clothes; even his face was different now. The cheeks were badly mottled, and half-healed scabs covered his lower lip. Parker was sitting by the front window, his feet on the sill. Forney and Bushrod were playing Big Casino by the table in the center of the room.

There were no rugs on the floors, no curtains on the windows. In the four corners gear was piled high, and dust covered everything. The Jenner house was womanless and, having gotten used to squalor, they paid no attention to it.

"I heard you had a rough time in Crystal City," Quartermain said. "Don't expect me to be sorry."

"That's all right," Harlow said softly. He had large eyes and thick wavy hair, but there was meanness in his lips and the way he looked at a man. "I figure on getting it all paid back, every lick!"

From behind Quartermain, Audie the Kid said, "We'd better pull his teeth, Mr. Jenner."

"Speak your piece, Quartermain, and then get out," Jenner said.

"All right," Quartermain said. "You start that fight with my crew tonight?"

"My son, Parker, was there," Rob admitted. "Also Audie the Kid. And Shallak and Davis."

"This your idea, Rob?"

"No," Jenner said. "It was his." He ducked his head toward Harlow.

Smiling, Harlow said, "I heard that it was a sight. Too bad you missed it, Quartermain."

"Next time I won't," Quartermain said, turning his head to Rob Jenner. "What are we fighting about? Something personal, or is it actually over the fence?"

"Nothing personal," Jenner said after a pause.

"Then let's drop it before someone gets hurt. You want a gate, then we'll put up a gate. Anything within reason."

"I spoke my word and I'll not go back on it," Rob Jenner said. "Now you better get out. Your welcome's played out."

Quartermain nodded and turned toward the door. He halted his glance on Parker. "Don't come around the fence again, son," he said. "All you'll get out of men like these—" he nodded toward Audie the Kid and Harlow—"is killed."

"Or get you killed," Parker said flatly. "Quartermain, I haven't forgotten Abe. Not by a jugful."

There was no more to be said, Quartermain

knew, and went onto the porch, Audie the Kid and Kurt Harlow following him. There Quartermain stopped, for his horse was gone.

HARLOW laughed and said, "There's no train to get you out of this one."

Quartermain turned to place Harlow in his field of vision. Audie the Kid had moved to the other side of the porch, out of Quartermain's sight, but this caused him no immediate concern. Harlow was the leader here and the Kid would not move until Harlow did.

"I've got you in a pinch," Harlow said. "Make you nervous?"

"Two-bit gunsharps never bothered me much," Quartermain said, and watched Harlow's face.

"You're in no spot to get mouthy," Harlow snapped. "You're not fooling me, Quartermain. I know how you guys get your reputations. You catch a guy all scrooched around in his chair and his gun tied up, then brace him. Well, I'm using it on you now. There are two men behind you. Why don't you try your luck?"

"I guess not," Quartermain said. "You going to make me walk home?"

"No need to hurry off," Harlow said. "I've thought about you, Jim, especially when Doc Holderman's vigilantes were after me. I made up my mind that if I ever cleared that mess alive I'd look you up and make you pay for every lick." His voice hardened. "Lift his pistol, Audie."

Quartermain sensed the Kid's movement behind him and, when Audie reached with his right hand, Quartermain drew and whirled at the same time. He caught the Kid alongside the head with the gun barrel, then snapped a shot at Harlow, who was drawing as he ducked for cover. Quartermain's shot chipped wood inches from Harlow's cheek. Then Quartermain was racing across the dark yard. A man by the bunkhouse yelled and a light spilled from the open doorway. Quartermain veered to the left where the horses milled in the corral, and then someone shot blindly from the porch.

By the barn he paused to listen. Shallak and Davis were by the house now and Harlow yelled for someone to bring a lantern. Skirting the barn, Quartermain came out into a small corral and the horses moved away as he ducked between the bars. Working his way through, he skirted the other side of the barn. He had a clear view of the yard and slid along the wall until he came to a side door. Entering, he worked his way past the stalls toward the front. Near the large door he found Parker Jenner's roan and hastily slipped on the bridle. Opening the door just enough to slip through, he vaulted onto the horse and rapped him with his heel.

He came from the barn like a shot from a gun, bending low as the horse ran. Shallak and Davis shot together from a position twenty yards apart, but Quartermain was through and into the night before they could shoot again.

There was no pursuit; he had not expected any. A few miles from the Jenner house he brought the roan to a walk, and traveled at that speed until he came to the fence crew. There he turned Parker's horse loose and let him go home, saddled one of his own and rode on to the ranch house.

There were two lamps still lighted in the hall when he went into the house and to the kitchen. On the back of the stove was a partially filled teakettle of water, and Quartermain stripped to the waist and washed. He heard a door open and close gently, and smiled when Carrie Holderman came in.

She did not speak, just walked up to him. They put their arms around each other. After a moment she moved away and said, "Like something to eat?"

"Yes," he said, "I would."

WHILE she refilled the coffee pot he stoked the fire for her. When the fire was hot enough, she fried him a plate of sausages and eggs. She sat down across from him while he ate.

When he pushed the plate back to lift his coffee cup, she asked, "What's the Jenner house like, Jim?"

He looked at her oddly. "I don't know, Carrie. Just four walls and a roof. Other than to keep the rain and wind out, it has no function."

She pushed her braids aside and massaged the back of her neck. "I can see going there did you no good, did it?"

"No. Kurt Harlow was there. If he hadn't been, I could have talked some sense to Rob."

"Harlow?" She was genuinely surprised.

"He's working for the Jenners," Quartermain said, and told her about Audie the Kid and the two others coming in on the train. He went to the stove for a refill on his coffee, then came back. "It struck me as strange that Kurt got mixed up in this so quick, but I suppose he came to settle his score with me and met Audie the Kid. Falling in with the Jenners was natural."

"But Audie the Kid knew where he was going when he got on the train." Carrie gave Quartermain a worried glance. "Jim, was Jenner hiring when you got here?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" He reached across the table and touched her cheek. "Go back to bed, Carrie."

She slid her chair back and replaced it by the table. "Jim," she said, "I love you."

He raised his eyes to her briefly. "I know, Carrie."

She waited a moment longer, then her slippers whispered on the floor and she went down the hall to her room. Quartermain finished his coffee and blew out the lamp.

In his own room he undressed and lay on the bed, bone tired yet alienated from sleep. He folded his hands behind his head and stared at the dark ceiling.

The sun woke him the moment it touched his face, and he dressed hurriedly. The men were in the cookshack; the noise of clattering silverware and small talk came to him as he hurried across the yard. He took his place at the end of the table and several men looked up quickly, grinning.

The horse wrangler was a bandy-legged little man with a piping voice. He slanted Quartermain a grin and said, "You had yourself a ball last night, but you're a poor horse trader."

Quartermain poured syrup over his hotcakes. "I thought I got the best of it. Pretty hard to tell in the dark."

Gil Purvis slid away from the table. "Work in five minutes."

He stomped out and the rest of the crew prepared to leave. Quartermain was left alone to finish his meal. When he went outside the horses had been saddled and the wagon was moving across the flats toward the fence.

Purvis and Cherokee came over and Purvis crossed his leg over the saddlehorn, busy with a cigarette. "I heard about Parker's horse. A little trouble."

Quartermain told him about Harlow and the others and Purvis swore softly. "He didn't lose any time hunting you, did he?"

"No," Quartermain said, glancing at Cherokee Nye. "Did you know Jenner was hiring toughs?"

"Nope," Cherokee said. "News to me."

"All right," Quartermain said. "Get the fence up and leave one more man out there tonight."

HE STOOD there while they rode out. When the line of riders was a mile away, he went to the house and into the kitchen. Carrie Holderman had a buckboard backed against the rear porch and was loading some buckets and mops.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"General housecleaning," she said. She took her sunbonnet from the kitchen table and put it on, tying the ribbon beneath her chin. "I'm going over to Rob Jenner's place, Jim. I think I can do more with a pie than a man can with a six-shooter."

"Carrie," Quartermain argued gently, "don't go there. The place hasn't seen a woman for six or seven years."

"Then it's about time," she said. "Don't argue with me, Jim, it won't get you anywhere. Rob once had a wife and daughters; he said so himself. Then he must be starved for a decent meal."

"I don't want you over there," he said. "Can't you understand that?"

"I understood it before you said it," Carrie said. "Go take Jane to town. She's waiting for you."

"Oh, so that's it." He leaned against the doorframe and tried to kiss her, but she pulled her head aside.

"Don't!" she said sharply. "Jim, I love you, completely love you—but that isn't

enough, it seems. All right, we'll leave it right there. When you make up your mind, tell me. Maybe I'll still be interested, and maybe I won't."

"Going to get yourself another man?" He meant this as a joke and realized immediately that it wasn't.

"I won't be hunting, Jim, but if one comes along I won't be waiting any longer."

She mounted the buckboard and pulled away from the porch. Quartermain looked after the retreating rig, then turned back into the house. Jane came out of her room wearing a pale yellow dress with a matching bonnet.

She smiled at Quartermain and said, "Is she gone? I hope she stays away."

"Not much charity in you, is there?" he said, and went to the barn to hitch up the buggy. He returned in fifteen minutes and handed her into the rig.

Jane Beal took off her bonnet and shook out her hair. She took his arm and hugged him briefly.

"I never forgot you for a moment, Jim. You don't know how hurt I was to find her on Running W." She slanted him a coy glance. "Did you think of me?"

"Yes," he admitted, "I thought about you."

"I was so afraid you'd marry some—" she groped for a word, then thought better of it. "You're easily impressed by a woman. Carrie knows how to impress a man, too. I've watched her."

"Let's leave Carrie out of this," he said.

"How can I leave her out?" She took his arm again. "Jim, I own a part of you. We can't snap our fingers and say it never happened." She fell silent for a moment. "I thought it was important to you."

"Jane, we were kids. How could we know what we'd be when we grew up?"

"Don't give me that about being kids, Jim." Her voice hardened. "You took advantage of me, and now I'm claiming what's mine. I mean it! Get rid of her, Jim. I don't want Carrie around any longer."

She had said enough, and now she settled back in the seat so he could mull this over.

[*Turn Page*]

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He would squirm and wriggle, but in the end she would have him. This thought satisfied her.

CARRIE HOLDERMAN arrived at the Long Knife ranch house around nine, and all the Jenners lined up on the porch and watched her get down from the buckboard. Then Bushrod recovered his manners and hurried to help her.

Kurt Harlow came from the bunkhouse and stared, his mottled face unfriendly. Carrie waved to him and called, "I see you got out alive. You're a very lucky man!"

Harlow growled something beneath his breath and turned away. Rob Jenner came off the porch with a heavy waddle. He said, "Miss, aren't you that young lady of Quartermain's?" One of his eyes was still closed and his lower lip was puffed.

"Not quite yet," she said frankly. "I haven't completely talked him into marrying me."

Normally she would never have been so blunt, but she had sized up the Jenners as the kind who responded only to complete honesty. Rob Jenner smiled and said, "The man's a fool, that's plain to see." He grew grave then and added, "You're in the enemy camp, Miss. There was trouble last night between your brand and mine."

"That was between brands," Carrie said firmly. "Mr. Jenner, I don't think I have any quarrel with you, do I? There now, you see—we're friends already. I came over here to bake you a pie."

"Well now," Jenner began, "we manage pretty fair by ourselves."

"But I enjoy doing it," Carrie said, and went into the house. The men followed her in a line. She stopped in the kitchen to survey the mess and said, "I'll have to straighten things out a little first." She turned and took Bushrod and Forney by the arm. "You boys build a big fire and carry lots of water, and while you're resting bring in the stuff from the buckboard."

Parker snorted through his nose and stomped out. He went to the barn and saddled his horse. Carrie watched him through the window, but said nothing about it. A moment later Parker rode from the yard and Forney and Bushrod brought in buckets and mops.

"Ma'am—" Rob Jenner began in protest, then changed his mind when Carrie smiled. "Ma'am, this is right neighborly, right neighborly indeed."

He grabbed two buckets and went out to the well for water.

As soon as he put the first rise of land between himself and the ranchhouse, Parker Jenner turned south and rode steadily toward the higher hills. He rode with his head continually swinging, scanning his back trail carefully.

An hour and a half brought him to a timbered rise and he paused, screened by the brush and deep forest shadows. To his right lay Trixie's cabin, five miles away and completely hidden by smaller peaks that tapered off to the river flats. But below, in the valley where the creek made a quick switchback, lay Joel McKitrich's place, with the barn and outshed to one side.

Parker studied carefully the lay of the land. A slight spiral of smoke eddied up from the kitchen chimney, and he swung his glance to the barn. McKitrich's heavy draught horses were in the corral, along with a pair of chestnuts that were harness broken; McKitrich's saddle horse was gone.

Leaving the forest gloom, Parker rode out into the down-beating sunlight. He let the horse singlefoot across the yard. When McKitrich's young wife came to the door, Parker swept off his hat.

"Morning," he said. "I was riding past and I thought I'd have a word with Mr. McKitrich."

SHIELDING her eyes from the sun, the young woman regarded him for a moment, then said, "He's not here. He went to town an hour ago and won't be back until evening."

"You know, that's nice," Parker said and dismounted. He led his horse around the house and tied him, then entered through the back door. Ella McKitrich was bathing the baby in the wash basin and Parker put his arms around her waist and kissed her.

"Don't, Parker," she said, pulling away. "I'm ashamed in front of the baby."

He laughed. "Heck, he can't talk yet."

"But he can see," Ella said, her full lips compressed. "Parker, I wish you wouldn't come here any more." She dried the baby with a woolly towel and slipped a pair of flannel bloomers on him. When she carried him into the bedroom and placed him in the crib, Parker followed her.

As she moved past him he tried to hold her, but she pushed his hands away. "Parker, I mean it! I don't want you to come here any more."

"That isn't so," he said. "You'll always be waiting for me, Ella."

"I'm not waiting any more," she said flatly. "It's wicked, Parker, downright wicked."

"What's wicked? Your living with McKitrich who you don't love?"

"I guess I don't," she admitted, "but he's good and I don't want to be a cheat."

He took her arm and pulled her against him, kissing her with a demanding roughness. She struggled against him for a moment, then her arms whipped around him and she moaned and clung to him. Parker moved his hands over her back and kissed her more fervently, but she fought him until she was free.

"No," she said. "I mean it. I've been scared of Joel because he's been a gunfighter. Now I'm scared of you because you're the same way. You and he are different, Parker. You're wild, and I'm through with you."

Parker tried to grab her again and succeeded in pulling her close, then he released her and backed away as though he had been stung. Ella had slipped one of his guns free and was pointing it at him.

"Get out, Parker. It's all over."

"You don't mean it," he said, then changed his mind when she cocked the gun. "All right," he said and went outside to his horse. She followed him at a distance and when he was ready to mount, uncocked the gun and tossed it on the ground near him. He bent and picked it up, then mounted and rode out.

IN TOWN, Jim Quartermain stopped before the bank, handed Jane Beal to the boardwalk, then drove to the end of the street and parked the buggy by the stable.

[*Turn Page*]

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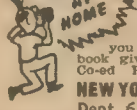

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Jane and Horace Pendergast were seated in the banker's office when Quartermain came in and took another chair.

Pendergast offered him a cigar and a light before saying, "Jane tells me that you're already stringing wire. There'll be trouble over that, Jim."

"There was trouble over it before," Quartermain said. "This should be no surprise."

"No," the banker said, "but as a banker, I hate to see it. The whole country will suffer financially. Running W and Long Knife beef have been the major source of revenue in the San Saba. With one gone under and the other weakened—" He spread his hands and let the gesture speak.

"Given a little time, shorthorn cattle will make you rich," Jim Quartermain pointed out. "Or doesn't that appeal to you?"

"I'm sure Mr. Pendergast is thinking of community prosperity," Jane said, "rather than personal gain."

"Thank you, my dear," Pendergast said, and beamed. "I was one of Izee Beal's oldest and dearest friends, Jim. Naturally, your involvement in this trouble with the Jenners touches me deeply."

"I've been touched too," Quartermain said and drew on his cigar. "For several hundred head of steers."

Pendergast became very attentive then. Quartermain added, "The trouble with being a big cattleman is that you never know exactly how much you own. The old man trusted that to Cimarron at the loading chutes. When I went over the books I noticed that the roundup tally and the buyer's tally were alike. Now you know that just doesn't happen. A roundup tally can be several hundred head off, especially if the crew's in a hurry, and Izee was. For awhile I couldn't figure it, then it dawned on me. Cimarron took care of the tally at the loading pens while Izee and Cherokee went east. Actually, a close tally through the chutes showed several hundred more steers than Izee or Cherokee thought they had. So Cimarron erased Cherokee's numbers, substituted his own and pocketed the difference." Quartermain leaned forward in his chair. "Tell me, Horace, did Cimarron deposit cash?"

"Why, yes, he did. I thought nothing of it at the time." He paused to pull on his cigar, darting a glance at Jane. "My dear, this must be distressing to you."

"I—it is," she said. "He's been with us for years and it's hard to think of him as dishonest."

Quartermain pushed himself erect. "Nevertheless I'm going to catch him. How much cash is Running W worth?"

"Less than five thousand. Izee invested heavily in his fence."

Quartermain nodded and turned toward the door. "I'm going down the street. Whistle when you're ready, Jane."

She gave Quartermain an intimate smile before he left the bank. The heat of the day was growing thicker and Pendergast got up and closed the door. The clerk was waiting on a dumpy woman, his voice running pleasantly in the manner of men who handle a lot of money.

Pendergast came back and sat down again. He said, "Too bad Jim had to find out about Cimarron. If he ever catches him now—"

"He won't," Jane said. "Cimarron can hide out, and I'll keep Jim Quartermain out of the hills." She smoothed the folds of her dress and then glanced up at Horace Pendergast, who was watching her carefully. "I have a hold over Jim that he can't break. In the end, he's going to do it my way because he has no choice."

Pendergast sighed and leaned back in his chair. He put his fingertips together and stared at the pine paneling for a moment. "I think it was a stroke of genius to finance this war with Running W money. Cimarron already has the smell of thief about him, and if he's caught it will be his word against mine. Cimarron made the erasures; I didn't. I only cashed the check and retained the difference."

He dropped his cigar in a cuspidor, then fished around in his desk drawer. "A good general always covers his flanks and, since I detest damning evidence, I would like to exchange the letters you wrote to me for the letters I wrote to you. I trust you brought them along?"

"Yes," Jane said and opened her cloth handbag. "I think you will find that they are all there."

The packets of letters were exchanged, each

one keeping a firm grip on the letters until their fingers touched the transferred ones. And because they distrusted each other, they examined the contents until they were satisfied.

Pendergast touched a match to his letters and watched them burn, dropping the ashes in the cuspidor. "Now our bridges are burned, Jane. Nothing can stop us now."

"No," she agreed, "nothing can."

HE LEANED forward across his desk, and his manner was fatherly. "I owe you a great deal, my dear. I never could have done this without you."

"You still can't," Jane said. "Horace, you needed a traitor and I was it. If you could have found one in the Jenner family, the situation would be reversed." She smiled slightly. "I've often wondered what prompted you to write me as you did. How did you know I wouldn't write to my father about it?"

"Izee often complained to me, good naturedly of course, about how you could spend money back East. I sensed that you had acquired a taste for the more expensive things."

"I like money," Jane said.

"And you shall have it," Pendergast promised. "Now, about Cimarron. We'll need him from time to time. Can he be contacted?"

"Yes, through Parker Jenner or the girl in the breaks."

"Hmmmmm," Pendergast said. "That's a knotty problem. Quartermain found her and gave her a week to get out. If we lose her, we lose our link with Long Knife. I can't be running out there all the time. Quartermain nearly caught me the other night. Harlow and his toughs have to keep this bad feeling stirred up. The whole thing hinges on the fact that Quartermain and the Jenners must fight each other. Parker's a wild one who can be led around by the nose." He scraped a hand across his lips and added, "I understand that there is a woman at the ranch—some doctor's daughter from Crystal City."

"She's a sweet thing," Jane said honestly, "and I hate her guts for it. Right now she's over at the Jenners baking them pies."

[*Turn Page*]

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"Pies?" Pendergast thought about this, his fingers drumming. "This is not funny. If I know Rob Jenner, he'll be eating out of her hand on an hour."

"And if he eats out of her hand, he'll talk to Quartermain," Jane said. "That's her whole idea, to get them friendly so they won't fight."

"This has to stop," the banker said. "I'll take care of it myself."

Jane dropped her letters into her handbag and pulled the drawstring tight. She studied Horace Pendergast frankly and said, "It occurs to me that you'll own a great deal of land after you foreclose on the squatters."

"Probably in the neighborhood of fifteen thousand acres, all with a clear title."

"While I hold nine and with only half a title. That's not much, Horace, and I'm not sure I like it."

"We agreed on the terms some time back," he said. "There'll be no changes made. I've run greater risks than you have."

"Running W is paying Harlow's wages," Jane reminded him, "and that could have been my money."

"My dear," Pendergast said, "you are disturbed over a few thousand dollars when I'm offering you a fortune. Win or lose for Quartermain, you'll hold a clear title to Running W, because Quartermain will part with the half you now want. He's doing all the work for you. Fences, stock, fighting, all will be laid at your feet without his knowing it."

"You're counting on the Jenners killing him," she said, "but what if he kills them?"

Pendergast laughed softly. "Who cares? He can go like Lee did, shot in the back. After that, you and I will make the rules and the others will live by them. We can own the sheriff, the judge, the money. Doesn't that appeal to you?"

"Very much," she admitted, and gathered her gloves before moving to the door. There she turned and regarded him again. "But I wonder when you and I will start measuring each other, Horace. I think you'd like to have it all."

He laughed until his round stomach jiggled. "I'll be satisfied with what I have, Jane."

"I'm going to make sure that you don't change your mind," she said. "I've done some low conniving on my own, against my father and Andy, and I know you and I are alike when it comes to money; we'd cut each other's throat for it. That's why I'll watch you just as you'll watch me."

He watched her whisk out of the bank, her long skirts switching. After she went down the street he returned to his desk and pondered this problem. He felt there was some cause for self-congratulation; he had been smart enough to divine her thorough rottenness.

Takes one to know one, he thought, and was turned slightly bitter by it. Pendergast had to admit that she was more honest than he, for he tried to hide his dishonesty behind semi-legalistic maneuvering.

Jane Beal was not stupid, and he made a point of remembering that. I'll have to watch her, he mused softly. She had a hold over Quartermain, and he wondered what it was. If he could get it away from her he wouldn't need her at all.

This thought pleased him, for he was a man who liked to use people.

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 78)

1. Team steer roping.
2. "Dingus."
3. Cedars.
4. "Little Joe, the Wrangler."
5. New Mexico.
6. Hoosegow.
7. New Mexico.
8. That the man was fired.
9. Buffalo and grizzly bear.
10. Bluebonnet—Texas, poppy—California, columbine — Colorado, sunflower — Kansas, yucca — New Mexico.

OUR AIR MAIL

(Continued from Page 6)

Surburbanite

Dear Editor:

Could you please find a small space for me in your Air Mail column? I'm an 18-year-old girl, 5' 2", have brown hair and hazel eyes. My hobbies are writing to pen pals, horseback riding, fishing, bowling, and roller skating. I will answer all letters, as I live in a lonely surburb. Please write soon, one and all.

LINDA OSTRANDER

3924 N. Central
Topeka, Kansas

Lonely Soldier

Dear Editor:

Writing to pen pals is something I've never done before, but it gets pretty lonely here in Korea. So I'd like to correspond with girls, boys, men and women all over the world, and I promise to answer all letters. I am 20 pears old, 6' tall, and weigh 185 lbs. I have brown hair and blue eyes. Come on, folk, drop me a line or two. I'll also exchange photos.

PVT. WILLIE H. DeVILLE

RA 18433081-377 Trans.
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San Francisco, California

Stunt Man

Dear Editor:

This is my third attempt to have a letter published, and I'm hoping this one will do the trick. I've traveled all 48 states, plus Canada and Mexico, and can write of the exciting places where I've been. I'm a professional parachute jumper and stunt aerialist by trade. I'm 5' 8", weigh 140 lbs., have sandy hair and blue eyes. I promise to answer all letters on the same day I receive them, and will exchange pictures.

JOE OGURCAK, JR.

226 E. Mifflin Street
Lebanon, Pennsylvania

Guitar Gal

Dear Editor:

I'm a girl of 28, 5' 6" tall, weighing 118 lbs., with deep blue eyes and long curly brown hair. I like all outdoor sports, and my hobby is playing the guitar and singing hillbilly songs. I'll gladly answer any letters I receive.

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by Professor MARCUS MARI

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Smiling and healthy today — in a Hospital bed tomorrow! Be ready!

Sky-high Hospital bills can wreck your life savings. Insure now!

We pay benefits for as long as you stay in Hospital. NO TIME LIMIT!

PROTECTS YOU and YOUR FAMILY

IN CASE OF **SICKNESS** or **ACCIDENT**..

No Time Limit HOSPITAL PLAN

PAYS BENEFITS FOR **FULL STAY** IN HOSPITAL

MAIL COUPON

COSTS ONLY **Pennies a Day**

SO SUDDEN!

THIS POLICY SOLD ONLY BY MAIL! Good Anywhere in U.S. or Possessions

MAIL CARD BELOW!

WE PAY CASH DIRECT TO YOU

In Addition To What You May Collect From Other Insurance

Go to the Hospital for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer — your "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays Benefits for sickness or accident just as long as you stay — *there's absolutely no time limit!* What blessed help! What's more, the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays off in cash direct to you — regardless of what you may collect from any other insurance policy for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. This is important — it means you can carry the low cost "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy IN ADDITION to any other insurance — then collect two ways in case of Hospital confinement.

FIRST CLASS
PERMIT No. 30
Sec. 34.9 P. L. & R.
Wilmington, Del.

MANY VALUABLE COVERAGES . . . ALL fully described in FREE BOOK we send you. One policy covers individual or entire family — birth to age 75. This is a wonderful offer by a reliable company—rate is very, very low. If sickness or accident puts you in a hospital bed, you'll look back and thank your lucky stars you were wise enough to take out the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy. DON'T WAIT TILL IT'S TOO LATE! ACT NOW!

BUSINESS REPLY CARD
No Postage Stamp necessary if mailed in the United States

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NORTH AMERICAN BUILDING
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